



# ABOVE THE HUSH

JACQUELINE DRUGA

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Jacqueline Druga

Above the Hush - By Jacqueline Druga  
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# 1 – CUT

Had I known his fate, I would have been kinder to him. Possibly not yelled, not been so mean. Had I known not ten minutes later he would be barely alive at my feet, I wouldn't have told him to hurry. Maybe, though, had he listened to me, and not been so hard headed, he would have been in his truck instead of twenty-five feet above ground.

I didn't know his name, nor would I ever. All I knew was he was the man who was blocking my driveway and I had to get out.

I suppose he was in some way a clear-cut message that life is short.

I'm not a mean person. In fact I am pretty patient. I am that person amongst a plethora of cable company call center people that annoyingly keep their calm. Priding myself on being that person able to bring reason to the most unreasonable. Yet, there I was standing at the end of my driveway dropping a bag into the old pick up, looking at the utility truck blocking my exit.

"Seriously?" I didn't think it, I said it, but he didn't hear me, he was up on the pole high above ground. His buddy stood in the middle of our low traffic, residential street beside the orange cones, waiting to wave traffic.

When did they get there?

I had made it home early from work, moved the cars so I could take my husband's truck, went into the house to get my things, and when I emerged with the first load, a box of food, there they were working on the line across the street from my house, but their truck was parked right smack dab at the end of my driveway.

"Excuse me," I called out to the guy standing in the road. "Hi. Excuse me."

He looked my way.

"Will you be able to move this?" I pointed to the utility truck.

"This will only take a few minutes. It's a simple maintenance job. Do you have to go now?"

"No, but in a little bit."

He gave me a thumbs up. I took that as, 'Yeah, sure, whenever you're ready' and I went back in the house.

"Take it as a sign, Audrey," my husband Ken said. "You aren't supposed to go."

"It's a truck blocking the driveway. What is your issue with this trip?" I asked.

"You know what my issue is," he said.

Ken, like me, had taken a half-day off work on a Friday. Only his half-day was to be there with our two year old daughter, Molly. His mother, who usually watched our daughter had to drop her off early.

I was focused on leaving.

"This is a bad idea," Ken said. "I really think you should reconsider."

Don't get me wrong, Ken was a good guy. A hard worker, a good father, but he didn't get it, he just didn't get it.

"And of all places," he said. "I mean, I can see if you picked a KOA campsite. But you picked a place with no signal, no electricity, nothing."

"That's the whole point."

"Aud, you have to leave your freaking phone in a box..."

"Stop. That's the rules, and again the whole point is to cut him off for three days. Three days, Ken. Not a long time."

"What if there's an emergency?" he asked.

"Then you have the number of the site director. He will come find us."

Ken knew about the getaway. I even talked to him ahead of time. It was my last ditched effort, my attempt to salvage something important to me. A friend at work heard about it. A camp, shut off from everything. That was what we needed.

"Do you even know how to camp? I don't think you have ever camped before in your life."

"I told you before, I don't need to know how to camp. I just need to know how to light a fire to cook. If not, I have Sterno. Besides, I'm pretty sure Michael knows how to light a fire."

"Is he even going to show up?"

There was my button and he pressed it. Angry, I grabbed the backpack, slung it over my shoulder and stormed from the house.

I was pissed off, not because his question was a cheap shot, more so because it was a valid one.

My son, Michael was from my first marriage and when his father and I divorced, he became my world. When he was younger, he was impressionable and our bond was unbreakable. I don't believe there was ever a mother and son quite like us. The key word being 'was'. Something happened on his road to adulthood.

Bad friends and bad choices, and over the previous two years he slipped away. He'd call less. I never saw him and when I did, I didn't even recognize him. Appearance or personality.

He had just turned twenty-one and I was certain the local bar knew him better and saw him more than I did. At least it looked that way according to his social media.

What happened to my son? Had I, as a mother done so much

damage to him that made him so explosive I walked on eggshells. Treading gently because I just couldn't handle not having him in my life. Yet, every day, because of his path, I worried he would slip from me and this world.

This camping trip was the key. I believed that with all of my heart. I just needed him alone, away from his friends and away from whatever he was putting into his body.

The two of us with no outside influences. I was sure I could get through to him.

Of course, Ken believed Michael willingly agreed to go, he had no idea I bribed my son by paying his police fines. Between the camping and the fines, I would be taking from Peter to pay Paul, and creatively shuffling bills for some time.

The backpack was my excuse to go outside and cool down, but when I tossed it in the back of the truck, I was far from cooling off.

Both utility workers were seated on the curb. The Pole Guy ate a sandwich, while Flag Man smoked a cigarette.

I put the pack in the truck and walked a couple feet to the curb. "Something go wrong?"

Pole Guy looked up to me. "No. Just taking a break."

"Why?"

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"I mean, your buddy here said it was an easy thing a couple minutes ago. You're taking a break so I figured something must be wrong."

"Do you need out of your driveway now?" asked Pole Guy.

"No."

"Then ..." he stood. "Find us when you do."

"Oh, good. I will. I just don't want to interrupt your sandwich time."

"Lady, what is your problem?" he asked. "If you want to have electricity next storm, you'll let me do my job."

"I did let you do your job, but you were having a sandwich," I said.

Then I believe he growled at me. "You know what, that truck will move when we're done."

"Yeah, well you could have parked it five more feet away!" I shouted. "And I will call your supervisor if you aren't down here when I am ready to go."

I spun on my heels and stormed back into the house.

"Done unnecessarily fighting with the electric guy?" Ken asked.

With a 'hmm', I walked over to the play yard where Molly sat. I leaned over. "Sweetie, Mommy is leaving."

She peered up to me and smiled. I kissed her.

"Ken, don't forget to plug in and turn on ..."

"The baby monitor, I know," he finished my sentence.

"She's two. She climbs out of the crib."

"I know. I'll put it right next to ..."

My phone rang, I looked at Ken, lifted my phone, saw it was Michael and answered. "Hey, there. I'm getting ready to leave now, I'll pick you up ...."

I bit my lip and avoided eye contact with Ken.

"Do you know how to get there?" I asked Michael.

"Yeah, I won't be far behind. I'll take my bike," Michael said. "I'm just waiting on my check so I can get some things."

"If it's money ..."

"Audrey," Ken said with warning.

I waved him off. "I can ..."

"Mom, I'll be there. I'll see you then. What's the big deal?"

"Fine, I'll see you soon. Be careful." I hung up the phone.

"He's not gonna show," Ken said.

"He'll be there." I sought out my purse, found it, placed my phone in there and kissed the baby one more time. "I'm heading out. They like you to check in before four."

"The truck is still blocking you in," Ken told me.

"Yeah, well, he will have to get his ass to the ground." I gave a quick embrace, darted a kiss to my husband and walked to the door.

"Audrey...good luck."

"Thanks." I forced a closed mouth smile and stepped out.

I had all intention of actually switching my mood for the utility workers. It wasn't their fault that I was trying to keep other parts of my life in order. Plus my father, had he been alive, would have kicked my ass for treating the workers like that.

He worked for the electric company until he retired.

After tossing my purse in the truck I walked toward the street, as I did the utility truck was backing up. I waved to the driver, then looked up to Pole Man.

"Thank you!" I shouted up to him.

He didn't acknowledge me. He probably was still upset with me. I was far less than nice and even warned him to be on the ground when I was ready to leave.

Before I knew it, he was .... Literally.

No sooner did I turn around, I heard this odd hum. One hum, short and quick. It made me spin back around. When I did, Pole Guy ejected off the pole. He flew outward, the force of something threw him and he sailed down landing with a thud and a crack, his head smacked off the pavement, a foot from where I stood.

I jumped back in shock, an immediate pool of blood formed

around his head nearing the tip of my shoes. I moved back faster and farther, careful not to touch the blood, when I noticed he jolted steadily as tiny sparks of current swirled over parts of his body.

His co-worker raced over.

“Don’t touch him!” I shouted. “Back! He’s still hot!”

It wasn’t that I was some sort of electric guru, I wasn’t. I instantly remembered all the horror stories and warnings my father gave me. I looked back toward the house for help. “Ken!”

Ken was on the phone as he raced out. I could hear him giving our address and details.

The other utility worker was freaking out. Grabbing his head, pacing in circles, crying out in shock and in sadness.

I knew Ken’s softball things were in the truck behind the front seat. I opened the truck door, reached in, grabbed one of the bats along with a tee shirt and headed back to Pole Guy.

I felt horrible. I wanted to help the man laying at my feet. I tried to keep it together, watching as he suffered, his skin slowly melting from the electrical current. His eyes stared up to me begging for me to do something. But I couldn’t. I knew it wasn’t safe, and that was confirmed when his co-worker ran back over.

“No!” I tried to warn him. “Not yet.”

Too late. He dropped down to help Pole Guy, the second he touched him he was zapped back. The charge wasn’t enough to render him unconscious, but it caused him a lot of pain. He sat on the ground holding his arm, falling apart emotionally.

I couldn’t blame him. I didn’t even know Pole Guy, his name or anything about him, but the sight of him ripped through me.

“Help’s on the way,” Ken said. “Oh, God.”

Holding the bat, I lowered it to Pole Guy. I didn’t see any more sparks or current and I lightly touched him.

“Aud,” Ken called my name.

I shook my head, and with the tee shirt wrapped around my hand I knelt near Pole Guy. Carefully I reached to him.

“Aud.”

“It’s okay. Check the other guy.” I brought the tee shirt near his head and peered down at him. I knew the shirt would do nothing for his bleeding or his burns. It was a mere gesture.

The poor man convulsed, yet he kept staring at me. He made this moaning noise, maybe an attempt to talk, I didn’t know.

I felt helpless. People gathered around, sirens blared in the background and all I could do was a vain attempt at care as he stared at me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to him. “I am so sorry.”



## 2 – TOLD YOU SO

My attempt to get to Gridlock Camp Resort early was unsuccessful. I was delayed another two hours. Ken, of course, used the tragic events as my reasoning not to go. As horrifying as it was, I made plans to go away with my son and I was going to do so.

I called Michael on my way and he didn't answer. He was either on his bike or ignoring me, so I left a message.

I ran into traffic on I-64, but it wasn't much. Sadly, there was no other way to get there but that highway.

When I found out about Gridlock I took the hour and a half trip there to check it out. The owner who also managed and lived on the grounds was a pleasant man, not much older than me, named Charlie. I found it funny that he ran this unique, off the grid camping resort and the checkin cabin, his house, located about a mile walk from the site, had Wi-Fi, cable and phones.

When I arrived, there were a few cars in the parking lot and I saw Michael's bike.

My son was seated outside the checkin cabin smoking a cigarette, wearing a knit beanie. I didn't get it. It was hot out, why was he wearing a cap?

He stood when he saw me unloading the truck.

"Hey," he said and kissed me on the cheek. "You okay? I got your message."

"It was horrible."

"I bet. I don't know why you still wanted to come."

"Because we need to do this."

"No, mom, we don't. You do."

I wasn't going to respond to that, I asked him to get the stuff from the truck while I checked in. He agreed and I walked to the cabin. Outside were these lockers that reminded me of the ones at a bus stop. I went inside and Charlie was seated at his desk watching the news on his computer. I thought it was the news, it could have been videos, it was hard to tell if it was live or something on YouTube. He was engrossed, it was a news report, I caught a momentary glimpse of a news banner and the word 'India'.

I didn't really look after that, I didn't want to deal with the news. Nothing bad. Not after what I experienced.

Charlie attention was half between me and the news. He handed me my locker key, then gave the speech, if there was anything I

needed... blah, blah, blah.

"You're in spot four. Once you get down the path, go right. You'll see the sign. Any fires you light, make sure they're out. If you heat water, you only need to do it in the morning."

I thanked him and stepped outside, sending one text to Ken to let him know both me and Michael were there. Once he replied, I shut off the phone and put it in the locker.

"You putting yours in?" I asked Michael.

"Why?"

"The whole point of this place is to be off the grid. Putting your phone in here takes away the temptation of using it."

"Why can't we use it?"

"It's just the thing of the place..." I said. "Plus there's no signal or Wi-Fi."

"So why lock it up?"

"Whatever, Michael." I slammed the locker and put the key in my pocket.

"Why are you getting mad?"

"Why are you being so difficult?"

"I don't want to lock up my phone like you. Big deal."

We were off and running.

The place was considered off the grid, but it was far from roughing it. Sort of like the upper class version of survivalist camp. The mile hike path was well paved, it would be dark at night, but well-lit and safe during the day. The path led to different camp areas. Each camp area was semi-private, even though you could see the neighboring camp.

Every camp had an already erected igloo style tent with two cots and a Porta John. They supplied the lanterns, a firepit with a cooking grate, well water and a five gallon wood burning water pot for hot water.

I thought Michael would like it. I really did. He didn't want to explore. He was hungry. While I made dinner, he played with his phone.

He claimed it was a game, but I could tell he was trying to get a signal. He kept trying as if suddenly it would happen.

As the hours passed he grew more and more agitated. He bitched about the tent, the area, how he probably didn't even have enough gas to get back. When his phone died, furious, he threw it in his bag.

After that it was game over.

I tried, but it was useless.

I didn't want to get right into talking about what was going on with him, what I could do to help. I had a whole playlist of things in my mind I wanted to say, but we were there all weekend. If I could

just get him to relax, just hang back and talk, I knew we'd start working on things.

My son was a mess.

He had lost three jobs in the same amount of months, his longtime girlfriend and all his old friends. Two court hearings were on the horizon and although he wouldn't admit it, he was destroying his body with whatever he was putting into it.

I should have listened to Ken.

Michael's problems were not mine. They were his to make and his to solve. I was his mother, I wanted nothing more than to help him. But I couldn't help someone who didn't want it. No matter how much I loved him.

His mood grew sourer as the night moved on; he fidgeted and paced. He spoke to me like I was overbearing and ridiculous, mocking my emotions.

I felt stupid for even trying. Like a fool.

He didn't want to talk or play a game, he was mad that I made him be there. And using the excuse he wasn't feeling well, he went to bed.

Like an idiot, I was pacifying. "Okay, Michael, I hope you feel better. Get some rest."

What the hell was wrong with me?

After stealing one of his cigarettes, I sat by the smoldering fire warming the coffee in the pot. I made up my mind that the next day we'd leave. It wasn't worth it. Fate tried to tell me not to go and I ignored it.

Little did I realize I would soon find out fate actually had played a role in it all, and more than anything, I believe I was supposed to be right there at that camp at that exact time.

### 3 – JAMMED

The five o'clock in the morning shuffling told me the trip was going to end even earlier than I thought.

"It's not you. It's me," Michael said. "You can't fix anything, until I fix me. And I don't know how to do that. I just know it's not here."

Then he left.

He asked if I wanted to walk up with him. I declined, I would stay. At least another few hours. I wasn't ready to go home, to face Ken and hear him say, *'I told you so.'*

It wasn't a fresh start for me and my son, it was just another round in the same game that we played over and over.

I was able to fall back to sleep and when I did, I slept hard. I dreamt of Pole Guy, which made sense. I hadn't really dealt with what I had witnessed. In the dream I watched him fall from the pole. He fell in super slow motion, making a whistling sound as he did, like a bomb falling. He even landed with a boom.

I saw his face all over again, his pain filled eyes and melting skin. Only in the dream I reached down to touch him. The second my hand lay upon his arm, I woke up with start, sat up on the cot and gasped in a huge breath, as if I had exhaled every bit of air from my body in the dream.

My heart raced in the aftermath of waking so suddenly. I took a second to calm myself, then left the tent. I lit a Sterno under the grate and heated the remaining coffee while I packed my items.

It didn't take the coffee long to heat, and I took some time to sip a cup and make myself a promise. While I wasn't giving up on my son, I was going to stop trying, at least for the time being.

The gear was a lot for me to carry alone and I wished I would have told Michael to take some. The mile walk took me forever, and I had to stop several times.

Finally, I made it to the checkin cabin and I placed my stuff in the back of the truck. I was embarrassed to go tell Charlie I was leaving, so I tried to be quiet as I hit the locker for my phone. The office was dark, but through the window I could see Charlie in the chair. His head slumped, he was sound asleep.

After retrieving my phone, I switched it on as I walked to my truck, tossing it on the seat as I got in.

When the phone was powered up I checked it hoping to see a message from Michael, but it was still searching for a signal.

I figured I'd have to wait until I was farther away.

It was still early and my plan was to stop on the way home, sit in

a diner, and have a cup of coffee and me time.

But something was terribly wrong, I felt it and knew it the second I made it out of the park and took the exit for I-64.

As soon as I entered the highway and began descending the small crest I saw smoke in the distance. A thin line of black smoke shot strongly into the sky. My first thought was there had been a bad accident on the highway ahead and immediately I panicked. Not even getting a third of a mile on the road I spotted all the stopped cars.

It was an accident, I thought, a bad one, too.

I slowed down making the approach, but when I got close I realized they weren't stopped in some sort of traffic jam, there was no orderly stopping, no tail lights, the cars were all part of a pile up.

"Oh, my God." My foot hit the brake and I turned the wheel to pull off the road.

With that many cars in a collision where were the emergency workers?

Grabbing my phone to call for help I stepped from my truck and looked for oncoming traffic. It was then I realized, there wasn't any.

No cars were driving my way.

In fact, I had been so lost in my own world and my own thoughts, I never noticed on the other side of the highway cars were at a standstill. Some off the road, some sideways.

My hands trembled and I fumbled to call 911.

There was no call to be made ... there was no signal.

There was also not a sound on that highway. Not a single sound.

All those cars, all that wreckage and not a soul walked about, nobody cried out. Engulfed in an eerie silence I headed toward the wrecked cars at an anxious pace.

I focused forward and a few steps into my run my ankle twisted a bit, I nearly lost my balance when I stepped on something. I looked down. It was a dead bird.

There were dead birds all over the place.

Instantly, I filled with panic. What was happening? What was going on?

My hands slammed down on the trunk of the first car I came to. A dark blue, four door sedan. My hands scaled across the driver's side until I made it to the door. Somehow, I don't know why, I didn't expect to see anyone in the car. Yet, I jumped in surprise when I saw the body of a man. He leaned against the window his head tilted back, neck arched and mouth wide open. The windshield was intact, the airbag hadn't deployed, there was barely any front end damage to the car.

Yet he was dead.

I didn't get a good look and didn't check for injuries, I jumped

back and bumped into the car behind me. Spinning around it was the same horror. Two passengers in the car, both dead.

I ran forward to the next car, a body had ejected through the windshield, it hung halfway on the hood, arms spread, eyes wide ... not a drop of blood anywhere.

My breathing raced and became hyperventilated as I moved from car to car on the highway.

Cars smashed or not, it was the same thing.

“Hello!” I called out. “Anyone?”

Car check ... body.

“Is anyone hurt? Alive! Anyone?”

No response. No sound.

Body. Body. Body. Body.

No!

I found myself in the middle of this massive pile up of vehicles. Where did it end? How far did it go? I started to run. The cars, SUVs and trucks on the road created a maze and I zig-zagged my way through barely looking at the dead occupants. Only trying to get to the end.

At the end of the pile was an overturned, tractor trailer that blocked the width of the highway, serving as a vehicular dam.

Surely on the other side there was something.

I ran to the median strip, slipping and sliding as I made my way down and finally around the truck.

I broke free.

A long stretch of highway was before me.

No more massive pile up, but it wasn't done.

For as far as I could see, cars and trucks were scattered about the road. Some off the road, some into the guardrail, some spun out and overturned.

It was endless.

I not only reached the end of the wreckage, I reached ... my end.

I felt as if I left my body, my only reaction was to scream.

I screamed in horror, long and loud.

Then I screamed again.

I couldn't stop. I dropped to my knees and kept on screaming.

## 4 – WITS ABOUT

In the form of a turtle, legs tucked under my body, forehead to the concrete, I outstretched my arms, scraping my fingernails against the surface as I cried. Something horrible, something positively horrendous had happened on that highway and I hadn't a clue what it was. All I knew was it was never-ending. The smoke on the horizon was something else devastating that I didn't want to face.

My first thought wasn't that it was widespread or global, or even national. It was that something big had happened in that small spot of Virginia.

Where was the help? The helicopters flying overhead? Maybe it happened so early no one knew. I even considered it was a nightmare and I was still sleeping.

Wake up. Wake up.

*Get it together*, I told myself. *You are stronger than this. Get up. Get help.*

But what kind of help could I get? What sort of help would do those people on the highway any good? They were all dead.

Following my hysterical breakdown I stood wiped my eyes and ran as fast as I could back to my truck. Through the wreckage, past the bodies, hoping against hope when I reached the other end, finally someone else would be there.

Nothing.

No one was there.

My truck was parked on the side where I left it and not a soul was around. I got in turned around and headed right back up that same side of the highway. Only this time I was keen about my surroundings. I paid attention. I noticed the cars, the trucks.

They were there, they just weren't moving.

I drove on the wrong side of the road all the way back to the Gridlock Camp Resort. Even using the entrance ramp to the highway to get off. It brought me to the road that led to the campsite.

At the very least Charlie had a landline, I recalled seeing it on the counter at the checkin cabin.

Driving faster than I should have, I pulled into the parking lot and right up to the cabin.

"Charlie," I called out as I stepped from my truck. My feet thumped against the wooden porch and I opened the door. "Charlie, I ..."

Charlie was still in the same position I had seen him earlier, in the chair, slumped over slightly in a completely dark room.

My voice lowered, "Charlie?"

The door slammed closed behind me causing me to jump and shriek. My heart thumped in my chest and I walked around the counter to where Charlie was seated.

*Please be sleeping. Please be sleeping.*

"Charlie?" I turned his chair around, and when I did he fell to the floor.

A slight scream escaped me, I brought my hand to my mouth. I didn't notice it until that second, the slight sour odor to the room. Charlie was gray, his eyelids were open and his eyes were rolled back causing them to be all white.

His lips were colorless yet he had black marks on his nose, cheek and fingers.

I reached down and touched him and he was cold, ice cold.

With a gasp I moved back bumping into the counter. I lifted the receiver to the landline ... nothing. No dial tone, like Charlie, it was dead. The phone dropped from my hand and I bolted out of there.

The question repeated in my mind, "What was happening? What was going on?"

While I asked that question, never once did I try to surmise an answer. It was beyond the scope of what I could imagine at that time.

I noticed a few cars in the parking lot.

Campers. There were campers at the resort. Find them, find people. That was my thought. Surely they were in the same place as I was, maybe they were shielded as well from whatever had happened. Just as I left the cabin to hit the trail, I saw the bikes on the stand for Charlie's bike rentals and I grabbed one. Taking a bike would be faster than walking down that mile long path to the dead zone that was the off-the-grid area.

My entire body shook so badly that I controlled the bike about as good as someone needing training wheels. It swerved left and right, my mind went blank on how to even slow down and stop. I kept trying to peddle backwards when I remembered, I wasn't ten, the brakes were on the handle bars.

I arrived at the end of the mile where the path split and signs pointed to the different camping areas. I veered to the right slowing down some and calling out, "Hello! Anyone? Help!"

As I approached where we had stayed I could smell coffee and food. Almost in a state of shock and mixed with panic I was yelling out on autopilot, repeatedly for anyone and for help.

Just before campsite six a man appeared in the road. He looked as though he had raced out, maybe he heard me, I didn't know. I tried to slow down, but I couldn't. I was out of control as much as the bike. He reached out to try to stop me. I shot to the left, went off the path and



the bike slid out from me, turning on its side and throwing me to the ground.

“Whoa, hey, are you alright?” he asked. “I heard you calling out.”

“Oh my God. Oh my God.” Those were the only words to come from my mouth.

“Let me help you.” He reached down for me. He was slightly older than middle-aged. Maybe in his late fifties, early sixties. Clean cut with a flannel shirt, probably his first time camping like me. He grabbed ahold of my arm and helped me to my feet. “You’re bleeding. Come on ...”

Bleeding? I was bleeding? I didn’t even feel an ounce of pain. I tried to respond, but I couldn’t. I was grateful someone was there. My mouth moved but I couldn’t speak.

“Ralph?” a woman emerged, saw me, then gasped. “Are you okay? Is she okay?”

“I don’t know,” Ralph said. “She seems to be in shock.”

“Bring her to the camp,” the woman said. “Maybe head to Charlie ...”

“Dead.” I blurted out.

“What?” the man asked.

“Charlie. Dead.” I wheezed out.

“Dear God,” he gasped in shock. “Charlie’s dead.”

I nodded then shook my head. “They’re dead. They’re all dead.”

“Calm down. Who?” Ralph asked. “Who is dead?”

It took everything I had not to cry, not to sound like a mad person, but I answered his question the best way I knew how. He asked who was dead. I answered, “Everyone.”

## 5 – LONG WAY

My hysterical state, along with my brush-burned and bloodied knees, had Ralph and Doris treating me like a child. The words from my mouth were no more different than those from a kid, in his bed crying about the monster in his closet.

“It had to be scary,” Doris kept saying. “You probably were so scared. You poor thing.”

They didn’t believe me. They pretended they did, but I knew the second Doris handed me a cup of coffee that anything they heard coming from my mouth they believed was a fantasy.

“I’m not lying. I’m not seeing things. I’m telling you ... they’re dead,” I repeated my earlier statement. “Sixty-four is one big graveyard. And Charlie ... he’s dead, too.”

“Look,” Ralph held up his hand. “Suppose that is the case ...”

“It is!” I barked.

“Hey, we’re just trying to help,” Ralph said.

“And we gave you a band-aid.”

“Oh my God.” I handed them the coffee cup. “There are people in this camp. I’ll find them, see if they’re alive, because those people on the highway are not. Something is going on. There are no police, no helicopters, nothing. Nothing but dead people and a million dead birds.”

“Chemical,” Ralph said and looked at Doris. “Had to be chemical. A chemical spill during the pile up would have killed everyone.”

“What about Charlie?” I asked.

“Could be entirely unrelated.”

“Thank you for your help, but ...” I headed from the camp. “I need to find out what’s going on. You should, too. You may not want to go to the highway, but Charlie is only a mile away at the cabin.” I walked out. I thought really hard about going to another camp. How would they treat me? Probably like I was nuts, just like Ralph and Doris had.

They’d find out though, the moment they tried to leave, because the highway wasn’t really all that far.

I grabbed the bike and decided to walk it up the path. I moved slowly, my knees were burning. I thought about what I had seen, and what my reaction should be. I mean, how does one react? It was hard to process and it seemed as if it wasn’t real when I stepped away from it.

Half way up the path I heard Doris call for me to stop.

I did.

She made her way to me. “Ralph wants us to wait right here. He

went to the other camps. He thinks it might be best if we all went together to see Charlie, then to the highway. Less scary that way.”

“You don’t believe me.”

“Dear, it’s hard. Look at this day. It’s a beautiful day. You’re telling us that not one car is moving on the highway and everyone is dead.”

“Yes. Why would I lie about that?” I asked.

“Not saying you’re lying.”

“Maybe a delusion?”

“Possibly.” She nodded. “Because really, a pile up, yes, but what in the world would make everyone on the highway die, along with Charlie.”

“I don’t know. I don’t,” I said. “But something did.”

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There were eight of us waiting outside the cabin while Ralph went inside. No one said anything until he emerged.

“Well?” someone asked.

“He is dead. I don’t know what killed him,” Ralph said. “Could be viral, I don’t know. He has some strange marks. However there is no power in there. We all need to face the possibility that we are under some sort of attack.”

“How did we survive?” another asked.

“Luck.” Ralph shrugged. “We were in that gully. We’re awfully close to D.C., an attack of sorts would explain those people on the highway.”

“We don’t know what’s on the highway,” said another from the group.

“No, we don’t. We can stand here all day and theorize, but I think we ... all of us should head down to the highway and see for ourselves. Either way, we need to go call someone for Charlie and that’s not happening here.”

Everyone agreed and we drove in our vehicles down to the highway.

I had seen the wreckage before, they had not. My initial shock from the scene was gone. I witnessed first-hand, their horrified reactions.

At first there was quiet. No one said anything, they calmly walked

through, then a man ran out of the wreckage and vomited.

Ralph followed him out shaking his head. There were tears, groans and cries of disbelief. One woman was almost as hysterical as I had been. I was still in a state of shock. I had screamed all that I possibly could already.

"This can't be all the way down." Vomit Man swung his arm out, pointing to the wreckage.

"I made it beyond the wreckage," I said. "Only cars are there with people in them, some off the road."

"Look across the road, Jeff," Ralph said to Vomit Man. "There are cars and trucks there, too." He turned his head to another man who emerged from the wreckage, he was calm, rubbing his chin. "Shane?" Ralph asked. "What are you thinking?"

"Had to be an EMP or something like it. Powered down the cars, they were going full speed, probably couldn't stop," Shane replied

"Why do our cars work?" a woman asked.

"EMP's are theoretical. In theory anything that's not running will continue to run and some old vehicles will," he pointed to my truck.

"No." Jeff tossed out his arms as if disagreeing. "If it was an EMP, nuclear weapon, whatever ... why are these people dead? Surely someone would have survived the crash. Why is Charlie dead? Whatever happened here killed these people while they were driving."

His words brought a silence that spoke volumes.

"We're close to D.C., maybe not that close," Ralph said. "But close enough that something could have happened like a chemical attack, and we were safe in the gully. But I am betting, whatever it is, we're smack dab in the center of ground-zero."

"I agree about ground-zero, however, I'm not an expert," Shane said. "But those people didn't die from any chemical weapon I've heard about. Then again, I didn't examine any of the bodies too closely."

"What do we do?" a woman asked.

"Tell you what we do," Ralph replied. "We assume there was an attack."

"So help is out there?" the same woman asked.

Ralph shook his head. "I don't know about any help, but my family is out there. If this thing is local, then considering we're from Indian, I am gonna assume they're fine. I'm ... I'm gonna grab my wife and head home to my family."

Family.

As everyone commented and said something about where they were from and how they wondered how far it went, if it was local, all those things, it hit me ... family.

My insides shook because not once did it dawn on me that my

family could be affected. I hoped and prayed at that very moment that Ralph was right, and we were at ground zero. That my husband and my daughter were safe ninety miles away.

And Michael ... my God, where was he? Was he in the middle of it?

My deep thoughts caused me to gasp in horror and my hand covered my mouth before I could scream.

Ralph was walking by me and he stopped. "What is it?"

"I was ... I was thinking about my family. My son."

He placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "I'm sure they're fine. Good luck to you."

"You, too," I said. "Thank you."

Everyone got back in their cars and trucks, each passing on wishes of luck.

How strange, we were a group of strangers standing together in some sort of major event. Yet, every single one of us left and went our own direction as if sticking together wasn't even an option. Why would it be? To us all, we were at ground zero and we just needed to get out. Once we did, everything would be alright.

## 6 – A SMALL DIVIDE

Unlike the others, I didn't go back to the camp. I didn't need to. Everything I had brought with me I had already placed in the back of the pick up. I wanted and needed to go home. It wasn't that far away. I lived in a small community almost smack dab in the center of the state of Virginia. A small town with fifteen thousand people, give or take a few. To many that might sound bigger than small town, but it really wasn't.

I saw the same people every day at the store, the gas station and the local Arby's.

I prayed that our little, hidden gem of a town was spared any of this event.

To get there I had to take the highway, at least that was the fastest way. But the pile up blocked the eastbound lanes. I was grateful that Ken's truck handled the 'off the road' stuff so well. The wreckage spanned about two-thirds of a mile leaving me no choice but to head into the median area. The median strip was wide, but it bent inward like the letter V. Nothing about it was easy, it was overgrown with foliage and filled with ditches. I pulled into the area slowly, fearing at any time something would break on the truck. But it was my only option to get past the pile-up. I made it around the tractor trailer that sealed off the final portion of the wreckage. I suppose I could have gone on the other side of the road, but the truck was doing just fine. Once I was back on the highway it was just a matter of weaving my way in and out of the stopped cars. Whatever occurred had to have happened early before the roads were completely filled with traffic.

While I was concerned for my family's safety, I didn't fear for their lives. I had no real reason to. As far as I was concerned the event was contained. Contained to the area where I happened to be. It didn't take long in my journey down the highway for all my thinking to change.

The thin line of black smoke I saw earlier traveling up to the sky grew thicker and wider with each mile that I traveled. I believed it was another accident, a bigger one, until I arrived at the source of the smoke. Then I believed at least for that portion of the journey, I had reached the end of the line. It was blocked, even more so than the pile up. There was no way through. None at all.

It was as if God had gotten ahold of one of those laser guns from science fiction and seared a line straight across the highway, extending horizontally from deep within the wooded area that lined one side of the highway, straight through the median completely

across the eastbound lanes. Flames expelled an enormous amount of heat as they mixed with thick black smoke across the entire line. And the highway wasn't just on fire, it was damaged.

I didn't need to be close to see the long and narrow crater that pushed the asphalt outward, causing rock and debris all over the place.

However, it wasn't anything from science fiction, nor was it an act of God that caused the crater or the intense fire. It was burning jet fuel.

I could smell it and it burned my nostrils.

A plane had crashed or fallen right there on the highway. The aircraft had broken apart and only a handful of pieces were big enough to identify. A door, a section of three windows and two joined seats tossed aside still containing their dead occupants.

The rest of the plane looked like it had shattered into a million pieces. Mixed among the debris were recognizable body parts. Arms, legs, torsos. Like the plane, nothing was together.

The day had been one shocking sight after another. One huge emotional blow. I was filled with pity for those poor people on the plane and hoped that they never felt a thing.

Everything was hard to comprehend because none of it made sense.

There were no answers as to why everything came to a screeching and deadly stop. The only thing I knew for certain was that more than anything I had to get home. I had to find out about my family, and even though I was fearful, a huge part of me believed they were fine.

I had two choices.

I could wait it out until the flames subsided, or I could backtrack and find another way.

I got back in my truck, turned around and headed back to square one. It didn't matter how long or what it took ... I would get home.

## 7 - EYES WIDE

My journey home would take on a new spin, with a new direction. Clearly, I couldn't take any heavily traveled roads. I had to find another route. My problem was I relied so heavily on GPS that having a map in the glove box was a thing of the past.

Since I was headed back, my best bet was to return to Gridlock Camp and see if Charlie had a map somewhere. Plus, even though I failed miserably at riding that bike down the path, I had calmed down some. I needed to get another bike. Not only just in case every route was blocked, but in case I ran out of gas.

While the world was more than likely fine away from this area of the attack, I couldn't bank on a gas station being open.

Then something happened not three miles from the airplane wreckage. I didn't know if it was because I was focused on the road ahead or looking the wrong way, but I spotted a motorcycle on the side of the road.

My foot slammed on the brake as fast as my heart slammed into my stomach.

Michael had left early. Without any clear cut knowledge of when the event occurred, I didn't even think about the possibility that he got caught up in it, that my son could very well be on that stretch of road.

I hesitated before getting out of the truck, scared to death to get a closer look. But I knew as soon as I saw it, that it wasn't my son's. Just to be sure I looked at the license plate. I knew his plate number by heart. He had the bike for three years and I was the person that renewed his plate, I was also the person that reported him missing when I hadn't heard from him for days and every text and call went unanswered.

The plate was not his and I breathed in a short-lived sigh of relief.

There was a chance that Michael made it through before the attack, but there was a chance he hadn't. Until I arrived home and saw him safe and sound at my house or one of the many places he couch-surfed, I couldn't operate on the assumption he was fine.

As emotionally hard as it was, I had to keep my eyes peeled, I had to look everywhere, and I knew I had to start with the pile up on I-64.



I tried not to look at the bodies. No amount of trying was enough. They stared back at me. Men, women ... children. Some were mangled from the crash, but most had succumbed from something mysterious.

I went from car to car, truck to truck. I looked in between, under and around, searching for a motorcycle. I wanted to be absolutely sure and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that my son was there or he wasn't. I didn't want to leave having it hang somewhere in the back of my mind that I could have searched better, and maybe just maybe I might have missed him.

I believed I accomplished that task.

Michael wasn't there, his motorcycle wasn't there. He had at least made it beyond the downed aircraft. If by chance I didn't find him back home, then I would scour that stretch of highway.

More than likely, by the time I made it back, search parties would be out.

While I didn't see my son, I saw so much that would stay with me for the rest of my life. Countless lives senselessly lost. Dying in such a way, I wondered if they had felt pain. There was a horrifying look on everyone's face, even the children. As if for one split second, the last split second, they had the thought, 'My God I am going to die.' I wished I had the medical knowledge to figure out what had happened. I was at a loss. As many others probably were as well. Much like the group from Gridlock Camp.

Most of them were probably on their way home. I hadn't seen a single one of them. Then again, I was the only one who hadn't returned to the camp to pack up.

Confident that I had searched the best and as thorough as I could, I headed back to my truck that was parked in the median of the road.

The highway ran straight through the mountain, the turn off for the camp was only a few miles away.

I steadily drove west on the east bound lane. I didn't drive fast, I wanted to make sure I scanned left and right as I drove.

My eyesight wasn't the best, but my searching skills were honed in. I was looking for a motorcycle, not people, so I was surprised when I saw a figure walking in the distance.

The person moved toward me. They were far enough away that I was in no danger of hitting them. They must have spotted me because they started waving their arms to get me to stop.

It didn't shock me that I saw someone. In fact, it made me feel better and more confident about the event having been confined to one area.

When I was close enough I noticed it was a man.

He carried a large backpack, wore a canvas jacket that was probably too warm for the weather, his hair was buried under an old and dirty baseball cap.

He ran to my driver's door the second I stopped.

"Oh thank God, someone else," he said, his voice was tired and rough. He took a moment, clenched the edge of the window and he truly looked grateful to see me.

"You can't get very far on this road," I told him. "Huge accident is up ahead, beyond that a plane crashed and took out the highway. It's still on fire."

"Is that where the smoke is coming from?"

"Yes."

"What the hell is happening?"

He was asking a rhetorical question, but somehow I missed that it was and started to reply. "I don't know."

"So you came from that way? What is it like where you're from? Is it the same thing?"

"I don't know. I left from here. I never made it very far. I turned around. I had to find another way."

"Which way are you headed?" he asked.

"East. A town called Waynesboro. I had to go around and find secondary roads."

"So you are headed back in that direction?"

"Yes, I am. I have to make a stop at my campground first."

"Great. Excellent. That's a lot better than on foot. I'll throw this in the back."

Before I could respond he had tossed his bag in the back with a 'thump' and opened the passenger's door.

"Whoa wait," I said. "What are you doing?"

"Getting in. Since we're both headed in the same direction."

"I don't know you."

"Why does that matter?" he asked, slipping inside.

"You could be dangerous."

"About right now, does it matter? I think there's something far worse and more dangerous happening."

I kept my hands on the wheel.

"Just drive. I'm not gonna hurt you, I can help you along the way," he said. "Besides, think about it. It's the smart thing to do."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know what's going on, but I do know this. No one should be traveling alone. That includes you and me. No one. I've learned out there it's true. Safety in numbers."

I could have debated a little bit longer about his uninvited presence in the truck, but time was ticking away. I already used a lot

of time looking through the pile-up, and I didn't want to waste anymore. At the rate I was going, darkness would slip up on me.

Saying no more, and resolving myself to his presence, I put the truck in gear and drove on.

## 8 – SAFETY IN NUMBERS

I made it clear I wasn't looking for a travel buddy and that I didn't need any help, I just had to get home.

He got it. Or so he said.

I didn't see the point at first about traveling with someone. But the more I thought about it, the more it did make sense. We were trying to get out of a dangerous area.

His name was Carl West, but introduced himself as just West. He looked rough around the edges and like he hadn't shaved in a while. His age was hard to gauge, he didn't look that old, but his voice sounded as if he had been shouting his entire life. He told me he had been camping in the area, didn't even know anything had happened until he went to get his car that was parked in the public lot. When he got there he saw that a truck had veered off the road and smashed into it. It was when he walked to get some help for the guy in the truck he started seeing the cars with those who had died inside.

Like me, he had his freak out moment, got his act together and moved on.

He fit that information all in within the eight minutes it took to get back to Gridlock.

There were still two cars in the lot. One of which I knew belonged to Ralph and Doris.

"You stayed here?" he asked.

"Yeah, last night." I shut off the truck and opened the door.

"I looked into this place, it's pretty pricey."

"It is. But it's off the grid."

He stepped from the truck. "Yeah, well, anywhere in this area is off grid once you get into the woods. That's what I do. Why are you back? Did you forget something?"

"I want to get a bike. With the roads blocked, I don't want to take a chance on having to walk if I can't drive through. I don't know how far this goes."

"That's good thinking," he said.

"Also a map. I'm hoping there's a map in the office."

"I have a map," he said.

"You have a map?"

"Yeah, doesn't everyone have a map in their car?"

"No," I answered quickly. "Not since GPS."

"Well, that's pretty dumb to rely on that. You never know when it will not be available. Like now."

"Where's your map now?" I asked.

“In my pack. I took it out of my car when I had to walk.”

We arrived at the checkin cabin and I stopped.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“The guy, Charlie, that runs this place. He’s dead in there.”

“You want me to go inside and you get the bikes?”

I faced him. “If you have a map, I guess there’s no reason to go inside.”

“Then let’s get the bikes.”

As we stepped closer to the porch of the cabin, surprisingly, Shane stepped out. He paused and looked at us shocked. He had something in his hand.

“I thought you headed home already,” he said to me.

“Highway is completely blocked. Get this ... a plane crashed there and I can’t get through,” I replied. “I came back for bikes. I thought you left.”

He lifted his hand and in it was a folded paper. “I wanted to see if Charlie had any maps. GPS ruined me, you know.”

“I know.”

“I don’t.” West added. “You should always have a map.”

“Who is this?” Shane asked. “I don’t remember seeing him when we went to the highway.”

I shook my head. “No, he was walking. Ralph and Doris ...” I pointed back to the parking lot. “Are they okay?”

“Yeah, another reason I haven’t left. They’ve been here a few days so they have a lot to pack up. I just wanted to make sure they got off okay.”

West asked. “So you’re traveling with them?”

“No,” Shane answered. “They’re headed northwest. I’m headed northeast.”

“Alone?” West asked. “Really?”

Shane nodded.

“You shouldn’t do that,” said West. “What if you fall, get hurt, choke on a peach pit. What if whatever happened isn’t done. I mean if you don’t have a choice, yes, but you do have one. Travel with us.”

I did a double take, looking at West. What? Was he just inviting everyone?

“Thank you, but I really don’t want to leave my car,” Shane said. “Once we get out of ground zero...”

“Is that what you think this is?” West asked. “You think it’s this area only?”

“I do,” Shane answered. “An attack.”

“Right here? Do you think whoever did this has something against Stonewall Jackson? Considering the Stonewall Jackson house is about twenty miles from here and that is the only thing around with a

name.”

“Ironically,” I added. “That’s close to where the plane went down.”

Shane looked at West. “Are you being serious?”

“No, I’m being facetious. This isn’t an attack. It’s something else. I just don’t know what. And that is something we can talk about when we’re on the road.”

Shane shook his head. “I can’t. I don’t want to leave my car.”

“Then follow us,” West suggested.

“Anyone want to ask me?” I spoke up. “I get it. I do. No traveling alone. But I have to find my family. I have to look for my son.”

“I understand that,” West said.

“Do you? I don’t think you do. I don’t know what time this ... thing happened. All I know is my son took off on his motorcycle right before it did. He left this campsite and I don’t plan on cruising along, carrying on a conversation because I am going to be looking out the window for motorcycles the entire way, and I plan on stopping when I see one.” Having exhausted all my breath in that flurry of speech, I inhaled. “So ... you want to travel together, there you have it. You two travel together. That way if one of you chokes on a ... peach pit, the other can perform the Heimlich. I’m going to start looking for my son.” I reached out for Shane and took the map. “If you don’t mind, let me just look at this for a moment.” Before he could respond, I had that map opened and started walking to my truck.

I opened the back gate and spread out the map, examining where we were and what road I could take. It looked as if heading north was my best option as it wasn’t a major roadway, so traffic would be minimal.

“Hey,” West walked up to me and spoke softly. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“I’m sorry that you have to find your son. That you have to carry that burden. I didn’t mean to come off like it was some sort of spring break road trip. I didn’t. I don’t have anyone to look for and I am pretty sure as shit no one will be out there looking for me, but I stand firm no one should travel alone.” He peered over my shoulder to the map. “You thinking of taking Bratton’s Run straight up north.”

“I am.”

“Yeah, well, twenty or so miles north of here is Augusta Correction Center. They have no power out there, which means you have no security from wanderers. Just about now it might not be an area you want to drive through alone.”

I raised my eyes to him.

“Not that I’m all that much protection. But there is safety in numbers.” He placed his hand on the map. “We should all go together.

We will all keep an eye out for the motorcycle. Deal?”

Admittedly I wasn't thinking clearly. I was scared and emotional. Who wouldn't be? I folded the map and nodded my head once. “Deal.”

## 9 – DISCOVERY

There wasn't much I knew about Carl West or Shane 'whatever-his-last-name-was'. Physically nothing really set them too much apart. Both were average in build, maybe slightly above average in height, they both hid their heads under baseball caps. Only difference was one of them was incredibly crisp and clean, the other looked like he would run from a bath.

I guessed I wouldn't get to know them because like I suggested, they rode together in Shane's expensive black SUV. I followed behind, the plan was if I saw anything, I was to beep. The bikes were in my truck, and after getting on the northbound road, I was hopeful we wouldn't need them. There were very few cars that were dead. The ones we did see had veered off the road.

We waited to make sure Ralph and Doris got underway, they were taking the same route north, then they'd head west. They trailed behind, but eventually passed us in their red minivan, with a hand out the window, gesturing perhaps good luck. I guess we were driving too slowly. Shane was driving and he set the pace. He kept a good one, enabling me to look out the window. I kept about ten car lengths behind.

My mind was full, being alone in my truck, I went back and forth between searching and thinking. The thinking part wasn't intentional. My mind would drift to the events of the previous twenty-four hours. The horrors of the highway, those who had died in the pile up and the incinerated bodies from the air plane crash.

I got so deep into those thoughts I mentally travelled away, almost like an awake sleep, so consumed that I failed to even see the road in front of me. The memories transported me back to those moments. Intense uncontrolled daydreams where I'd hear someone call out for help, in those daydreams people were alive.

A part of me was happy that mine weren't the only eyes on the road. Because had I been travelling alone, I surely would have missed something, or a sign of Michael.

It was doubtful Michael took the north route, unless the event happened after he left. Then again, he didn't come back. Surely, he would have come back if something that big occurred.

Maybe not. I stopped knowing who my son was. I missed him terribly even when he was in the same room.

My cell phone had died, I didn't bring my car charger so I was at a loss as to if it would have picked up a signal, and if there had been one, would anyone have answered?



Not long after Ralph and Doris passed us, maybe ten minutes, we travelled through a small rural living area that lined the road. Mainly it consisted of older frame homes and businesses long closed down. The road split at the railroad crossing and a train blocked the way from us going straight. It was just parked there as if it had just stopped. Shane veered left at the Y, probably seeing if he could go around. The train wasn't that long and the road did loop around.

At the end of the looping road was another intersection, as I suspected he'd do, Shane started to go right, but then he stopped and immediately turned to the left.

What the hell was he doing?

He pulled into the parking lot of a roadside diner. A small lot with two old fashioned gas pumps out front. The single story, copper colored building was long and narrow.

The taillights to Shane's vehicle shut off, then he and West stepped from the SUV.

I shut off my ignition as well and got out. "What's going on?" I asked.

Shane pointed. There were three cars and a truck in that lot, but at the farthest end of the diner were three motorcycles. He swung and pointed toward the church next door. A motorcycle lay on its side in the grass.

I shut the truck door.

He obviously spotted them when he was about to turn.

"Thank you," I said and walked toward the three motorcycles. I saw from the corner of my eye West ran to the one by the church.

"There's a body," West shouted out.

My eyes closed for a second.

"It's not your son!" he shouted. "This guy is too old."

Thinking, 'Thank God', I examined the bikes outside the diner. One was red, that wasn't Michael's. His bike was older and black. The other two, those similar in appearance, their plates didn't match.

"Are we good?" Shane asked.

"Yes, we're good. They aren't his."

Shane put his hands on his hips and faced the diner.

"What?" I asked. "What's going on?"

"We need water," Shane said. "I need water at least. We don't have any."

"I have like two bottles," I said.

Shane shook his head. "Not enough if we get stuck somewhere."

"So you want to go in there?"

"I think we should. At least get water. You don't have to go in."

"No. No, I ... need to see. Maybe they're all fine."

West returned from the church and met us at the door. "We going

in?"

"Yes," I answered. "We need water."

"Let's get in there, get what we need and get out," West said.

"Maybe grab some supplies," Shane suggested. "A simple two hour, one hundred mile trip could turn into two days and five hundred miles. We don't know. We may be stuck in the area. It could be sealed off."

"You're back on the attack thing," West shook his head. "Okay." He stepped ahead and grabbed the door. The second he opened it a cloud of smoke poured out. In fact the entire diner was veiled in a cloud of smoke, which made it hard to see. There was no power, no lights.

West propped the door open to air it out.

The scent of burnt bacon filled the air, but I couldn't make out much in the diner. The two front windows brought in a lot of sunlight, which reflected off the smoke.

"Over there," Shane said. "Register and a cooler."

"I got these windows," West added.

"Don't bother," Shane told him.

"No, I'd like to see what we are grabbing." West lifted the window.

"I'll check over here," I said, walking slowly across the diner.

It wasn't very big and it didn't have many tables. Slowly the smoke started to thin out, I could make out the row of booths, and that was when I saw the first two bodies. They were seated in a booth across from each other, their coffee cups tipped over. The man in the booth had his head down on the table, the woman sideways on the bench seat.

"See if they have any boxes of cereal," Shane said to me. "By the lunch counter there. Whatever you can grab."

The counter came into view as the smoke lifted toward the ceiling. The tables were empty, but the counter wasn't.

I walked closer.

Half eaten breakfast meals were on plates spread across the counter. Two patrons had fallen to the floor from the stools, the other two, like the man in the booth were faceplanted into their food.

I didn't look closely at the bodies, I didn't want to. I focused more on the shelf of mini cereal boxes positioned under the television.

They were my focus. The corn flakes, the raisin cereal and the sugary things. I concentrated so deeply on looking only at those cereals that as I walked behind the counter and my foot caught on something, down I went.

I didn't land hard on the ground, because I landed on a person.

I screamed a freaked out, and frightened "Uh", finding myself face

to face with the body of a waitress.

"You alright?" West shouted out.

I didn't answer. My body went into that same panicked meltdown it had with the bicycle. So thrown and disturbed, basic movements were impossible. I hurriedly tried to get up, my hands pressing against the cold hard flesh. I thought I had it, but my fingers slipped, causing her rigid arm to shoot above her head and me to lose balance. I careened forward again, this time nose to nose with her. Then suddenly I stopped. I couldn't move. I pulled back slightly and stared.

"Audrey." West reached down for me. "Are you hurt?"

An eerie calm had befallen me, and I spoke with dazed revelation. "Oh my God. I know how they died."

West helped me to my feet. "What?" he asked confused. "What are you talking about?"

"I know how they died, all of them." I looked back down at the waitress. "They were electrocuted."

## 10 – CHANGE UP

The name tag on her uniform said her name was Celia. She wasn't old, not at all. Maybe thirty, pretty, too. Her face was a blueish gray color, but the color of her face wasn't what made me realize the cause of death. It was when her arm shot upward and I saw the remote control to the television was fused to her hand. Her forearm was black.

Neither Shane or West believed me at first, I know they thought I was insane. After all, how did I come to the conclusion in an instant?

It wasn't an instant, not really. All the information was stored in my brain, collecting there, I just needed that final piece of the puzzle to make it click, and that piece was the remote.

Immediately, I was suddenly acting the part of some television medical examiner, walking from body to body.

"With Celia," I said. "It came from the television to the remote. Him ..." I walked over to a man who was slumped on the counter. "His phone." I moved to the man on the floor. "He was too close to the cooler. The couple in the booth, I don't know."

"And you're sure?" West asked.

"Yes. The black marks we are seeing on everyone, they aren't pooling blood, it's burn marks, that is where the current made its way in."

"Electrocution?" asked West.

"Yes."

"All of them?" Shane asked.

"All of them."

"How in God's name is that possible?" Shane tossed his hands up. "How? Fucking electricity would have to have jumped at them."

"Electric currents work like that. How and ... why are the questions," I said. "Something obviously happened in this area."

Shane gave West a smug look.

"What?" West asked him. "So you may be right, it may be localized. I'm still not convinced it's an attack."

"Oh, I am," I said. "It has to be some sort of weapon." I saw as West's eyes rolled back, I knew he thought I was ridiculous. "What is the problem with that theory?"

"Who in the hell is gonna attack this part of Virginia?" West asked. "They aren't. Not here. Not in this pissant section. If it is localized, it's a fluke."

"How ... how do you know this stuff?" Shane asked. "Are you a scientist?"

“Me? No.” I shook my head. “No, I work for the cable company. When your bill is wrong or cable is out, I’m the person you talk to.”

“Really,” West said. “I thought all those people were in India.”

Shane’s jaw dropped and he turned to West with a disgusted look. “That was really wrong.”

West moved his hand in a shooing wave.

Shane faced me. “So they taught you this stuff at the cable company?”

“No, my father did. Just something he talked about,” I said.

“Okay.” Shane held up his hand. “So right now, theoretically, we know what caused all these people to die. We just don’t know why or how.”

“But we know when,” West said.

I looked over my shoulder and West’s hand was pointed up to a clock on the wall. An older clock with an electric cord running from it, its hands had stopped. The clock had stopped at 7:43.

7:43.

Immediately I thought of Michael. He left the camp at five in the morning. He had plenty of time to get out of the area before the event occurred. Knowing that made me breathe a little easier.

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I hated that we took things from that diner. Cereal, candy, beef jerky, water. West even grabbed bacon that hadn’t burned. In my opinion, we didn’t need it. Once we made it out of the affected area, everything would be fine. We’d look silly carrying survival supplies.

I still rode by myself in the truck. Knowing what time everything stopped, I was confident Michael was far out of the area and wasn’t as diligent about looking. Although, I still looked.

The road by the diner wrapped around the train tracks and set us back on our path north. I thought for certain at some point ahead we’d run into emergency crews, possibly roadblocks, even the Red Cross. It wasn’t going to be long before we emerged back into civilization and got the explanation we needed.

Occasionally, I’d turn on the radio. Each time I did so, I hoped I’d hear something. But there was nothing, not even static.

I saw a sign for the Augusta Correctional Centre, it was five miles ahead and I thought about what West had said. Even as we put miles between us, there were still no signs that we were free from the affected area. Cars and vehicles were still randomly stopped on the

road and off to the side. They were becoming such a common sight that I stopped looking. How I saw it ... I still don't know. Shane and West did not. They didn't even slow down.

I laid on the horn, beeping it. Why didn't they stop? They were out of my view for a good thirty seconds before they returned.

I was nervous standing outside of my truck, because I could see the prison.

Both Shane and West jumped from the SUV and raced toward me.

"What is it?" West asked. "We didn't see a motorcycle."

I folded my arms tightly to my body and tilted my head as my way of pointing. "Look."

I watched as they both turned their heads to see.

"Tell me," I said. "Tell me that's not them."

"It can't be," Shane said.

"Who?" asked West.

Off the road, plowed into a heavily overgrown area was a red minivan. It was one of those deluxe models, the type a family would have ... grandparents. The same kind Ralph and Doris had been driving.

"Ralph and Doris," I said.

"No." West shook his head and spoke confidently. "It is not them."

"There's only one way to know." Shane headed toward the van.

My mind kept going to the prison. What if West was right, what if it was dangerous out there, and some murderous escapee ran them off the road? When we arrived at the van, I knew that wasn't the case.

The second I saw Doris, her face smashed against the passenger window, I knew.

"Stop." I yelled at Shane as he reached the handle. "Don't touch it. Just in case."

"In case what?" Shane asked.

"In case it's still hot." I pointed. "Look at her face. The black marks."

"Jesus." Shane stepped back. "No. That's not possible. We were just with them. How ... how did we not get hit? There's no immunity to electricity."

"It was twenty miles ago they passed us," West said. "Which means this happened about twenty minutes ago."

My eyes widened. "We were in the diner. There was no power there."

West let out a long groan. "Oh God, if we weren't looking for motorcycles we'd be dead too. We dodged a bullet and it was close. We're alive not only because we were in that diner, but because we ... weren't in our vehicles either."

West's statement brought us all to a stop. For a few seconds none

of us said a word.

Shane ran his hand over his mouth, looked at the van then to West and me. "I think ... I think it might be a good idea now to take the bikes."

There was no argument on that, none whatsoever.

Unknowingly we had been in a game of Russian Roulette. We had been lucky. Yet, how many more times would that cylinder spin and deliver a blank? It was a chance we couldn't take.

We all knew without verbalizing, that whatever occurred was still happening. Seeing Ralph and Doris was more than enough confirmation that even though we had survived, we weren't safe, we weren't in the clear.

It wasn't over.

## 11 – FLICKER

Taking the bikes was the safest idea, the smart thing to do. However, the area was not conducive to individuals not conditioned and trained on bikes. None of us were. I was the worst. It was evident that I'd barely rode a bike. Surely, I'd be a guru when all was said and done.

I wanted to say I held them up, but that wasn't the case. The terrain was up and down, hills and valleys with very little straight areas that allowed for smooth riding. We had taken pretty much everything we could and were weighed down.

I for one wasn't in tip-top, physical shape.

For a lot of the trip we walked the bikes, then it started to rain. It wasn't like we didn't see it coming, we did, there was just really nowhere to stop.

The last hill before Buffalo Gap was a killer. I was more winded than I could recall ever being in my life. My back ached from carrying my bags, and it was hot. The steady, light rain actually felt good.

There was a small white church. It was a cliché of small town churches. Not big, white framed, a single floor with a steeple. A white picket fence surrounded it as it perched on the corner. That was where we stopped. Across the street was one of those ranch styled homes, a nice one, too. We could have gone there, but we stood more of a chance of an empty church, than an empty house on a Saturday.

There was the chance that everything was normal, but I knew that chance was slim. We hadn't seen a car, at least not one that was moving.

The church was locked; Shane broke the lock on the back door to get in. There wasn't a parishioner or pastor, we had the place to ourselves. The quietness was a given and the church was dark. No sun to peek through the stained glass windows. No electricity.

We were safe.

I slipped into a pew, tossed in my bags and immediately lay down using the backpack as a pillow. I was spent. I needed to take a break. My body needed to relax. I wanted to wash my face and neck, but that could wait.

"I feel like we walked a hundred miles," I groaned.

"More like fifteen," said Shane.

I looked up. "Only fifteen?"

Shane paused in lighting candles. "It was all uphill. So that's why it felt longer. We have a lot of downhill tomorrow, so it will be a better start." He pivoted his body to look at West in the back of the



church. "What are you doing?"

"Thinking about that house across the street."

"What about it?" Shane asked.

"I think we should go over there. See if anyone is home or ... in there. Maybe there's a clue or something, I don't know. I'm curious. If they are there and dead, did they die the same way?"

Shane shrugged and stepped from the front of the church into the main aisle. "Okay, I'm game. Audrey?"

"No, you two go ahead. I'm gonna stay right here."

"You sure?" Shane asked.

"Positive."

There wasn't an ounce of fear when they left. I wasn't afraid of being alone. In fact I was too beat to feel anything but my head resting back on my pack, and I fell fast asleep.

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The sound of objects dropping caused me to wake and sit up. When I did a bright light flashed in my face, temporarily blinding me.

"Sorry." West shut it off and handed it to me. "For you."

"Thanks." I scooted to the end of the pew and saw the canned and boxed food items in the aisle. "Did you steal all this?"

"It's not stealing," West defended. "They don't need it. They were .... They were home, but they were dead."

"You can't steal from the dead," I said.

"It's not against the law."

"Yeah, I think it is," I argued.

"I don't think laws apply now," West said.

"There is still civilization out there. We're close. How are you going to defend yourself about this?"

West laughed.

"This is funny?"

"Yeah, it's really funny." He laughed again then exhaled.

"I wouldn't worry," Shane said. "Look at it this way. It's food. Not just cereal." He handed me a can.

"We could have coffee..." West held up one of those French presses. "If we had a means to boil water. I for one don't want to light a fire in here, and it's too wet outside."

I reached back for my pack, opened it, grabbed a Sterno and handed it to West. "If you can figure out how we can make a stove, this will work."

“You have Sterno?” Shane asked.

I nodded.

“How many?”

“Like eight more.”

Shane whistled. “No wonder you were complaining about the heavy pack. We can make it work.” He stood, then reached down for one of the flashlights. “I’m going to go explore, see what I can find to heat water and our food with.”

He wasn’t gone long, but his exploration was successful. He handed me a couch like pillow, then one to West. He ended up taking hymnals, creating two walls on each side of the Sterno then balancing a coffee pot on the books in order to be over the flame.

We watched it carefully to make sure the books didn’t burn. After the water boiled we used that same glass coffee pot for the food by putting water in there, then the cans in the water.

My can was filled with a thick stew type soup and it hit the spot. I was hungrier than I thought.

We sat on the floor around the burning Sterno. Shane told of how he found the Pastor’s office and in there was a couch; hence the pillows. I suggested that maybe a better place to sleep until he told me the body of the pastor was in there. I quickly changed my mind and opted for the second pew.

There were several moments of silence where we just stared at each other; spurts of general conversation, then quiet.

I guess we were all thinking the same thing. There we were, three people who had just met, thrown together by circumstance, yet we knew nothing of each other. I had my guesses about the two men.

“So you worked for the cable company,” West looked at me. “Did you like it?”

“It was a job. Customer service.”

“Are you one of those prepper people?” West asked. “I mean, is that why you were at Gridlock?”

“Me? Prepper?” I shook my head. “No. Not at all. Not even close. Gridlock sets up tents for you. It isn’t a prepper place, believe me. It’s a place you go to shut off from the world.”

“It saved your life,” West said. “Why were you there?”

Shane interjected. “Why is that important?”

“I’m making conversation. We’re traveling together. Just curious who I am with. That’s all.”

“It’s fine.” I waved my hand. “I thought it would be a chance to heal me and my son. He’s ... he’s been on a downward spiral with his life. He’s changed so much. He has anger issues, and substance abuse issues. I just ... I just thought if I could get through to him, get him away, I could make him see.”

"You can't make him get help unless he wants that," West said.

"I know. I know." I lowered my head. "In typical fashion, he found something to get angry about and use as a reason to storm off. And he did. If he hadn't, if he just stayed for breakfast, we would have been together."

"I'm sorry," West said. "I really am. I hope you find him."

"Me, too." I sighed. "Okay, what about you two?"

Shane answered first. "I'm a plumber for the county. Parks, recreation, I knew the area well ... obviously. I knew Charlie. When he heard my wife left me he offered me a camp site, you know to get away. I didn't want to go, but when ... when Julie ... my wife, was posting on social media about her new guy and stuff, I took him up on the offer. Cut off from everything would keep me from constantly going online."

"And creeping her," said West.

"And creeping her," Shane said. "What about you, West?"

"Not much to tell." He shrugged and spoke as if what he was going to say was not important. "I was on an extended camping trip. Just, you know, wanted to see the country. I'm a problem solver, I fix things. Solutions expert and developer for the biggest online company in the world. I graduated MIT, top of my class, but when my son ... "He looked at me then looked away. "Was diagnosed with Glioblastoma, I couldn't fix it. I couldn't ... fix it. When he died, it was too much for me. And that ... is what brought me here. Hiding out in the woods, off the grid."

I would never have guessed West was this super intelligent executive. Nor would I have guessed Shane was a plumber. I felt bad for West, really bad. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was, but I assumed they were words that he had already heard, and meant little to him. I reached out and laid my hand over his. I gave a gentle squeeze.

"Sorry," Shane said. "That's horrible for you."

"Seems like all of our misfortune," West said. "Saved our lives." He scraped the bottom of his can. "So to stay that way I think our best bet is to avoid anything electric."

"I agree," Shane said. "If Audrey is correct, and I believe she is, something is causing the electrocutions."

"But what?" West asked.

"A weapon maybe," I said. "Or maybe the poles reversed and it messed with the polarity. It could be a lot of things. I am willing to bet that once we get out of the zone, they've already figured it out. You went to MIT, what do you think?"

"I think ... I think it's something that is new, never happened. Like you said, a lot of things could cause it. If ... If we're in a zone," West

said. "It's just a matter of getting out of the area. I don't know if that's the case. Unfortunately, we have no information so there is no proof that it is or isn't localized."

After a murmured, "Oh my God," Shane blurted out. "India."

West and I looked at him.

"India," Shane repeated. "I was thinking about West working at MIT and you at the cable company and his comment about India came to mind."

West shook his head. "You have got to let that go,"

"No," Shane said. "When I checked in yesterday, Charlie was watching the news."

I snapped my finger. "Yes, he was watching when I checked in. I didn't ask what it was about."

"It was about India," Shane said. "An apartment building. Two hundred people died from electrocution in that apartment building. Oh my God, I can't believe I didn't think of that. This didn't happen this morning, it started yesterday, and if India is related to this, it isn't just here ... my God, it's everywhere."

I didn't want to hear that. It had to be a coincidence, just like Pole Man, his electrocution was a coincidence as well. It had to be. I had my family out there, the idea that it was far beyond where we were, that it wasn't localized, and we weren't at ground zero, meant that I had to face the fact that my family could be affected. I couldn't think that way. I didn't want those thoughts. In my mind Ken was home with Molly, holding her on the couch, watching the television and assuring her that I was fine. Michael was there, too, apologizing for leaving the camp and not going back. My family was being a family and waiting on me.

Those were my fantasy thoughts when my family came to mind. That is what I believed, that is what pushed me to walk up those hills. To get home, to get to my family. Truth be known, if I thought any other way, believed that something happened to them, I was certain I wouldn't have the strength to go on, let alone push a bike up another hill.

If something happened to them, I was done.

If they weren't alive, then I didn't want to be either. So I decided to think positive, that was the only way to keep going.

## 12 – SHOCKING FACTS

While I hadn't seen any, I was positive animals survived. At least one cat had. It cried all night long out of hunger or pain, or missing its owner. West said it wasn't a cat, he said racoon, and Shane was fast asleep, he never heard anything.

In fact, in the morning, he didn't believe us.

Especially when we put food out and it was never touched.

Before we left, after we packed up, I made sure we cleaned up the sanctuary. I didn't feel right leaving anything lying around. Even with the pastor dead it just felt disrespectful.

I didn't dread the journey home, especially since the first few miles were all steadily downhill, and according to the map, there weren't anywhere near the elevations we encountered before now.

I was twenty-two miles from home. If we kept a steady pace, stopping only when needed, I'd be home in four hours. Before noon. If Michael wasn't there, Ken and I would head out to search.

I felt renewed and excited, ready for the day until we turned the bend and heard that cat again.

A soft, whimpering sound, high pitched, almost nasal.

"There it is again," West said. "Believe us now, Shane?"

"That's not a cat," Shane replied.

"I told her that. It's a racoon."

"It's not a racoon either." Shane stopped pushing the bike, put down the kick stand and abandoned the bike.

"What is he doing?" I asked.

"Everyone stop with the bikes and look around." Shane said, "It's not an animal. Listen to the sound ... it's a person and they are close."

Concerned I thought, 'Oh my God', balanced my own bike on the kickstand and placed my bags next to it.

West did the same.

Did it come from the house across from the church? It couldn't. West and Shane had gone there. There were only a couple houses.

I focused on the side of the road, West headed back, and Shane moved forward.

The sound stopped.

Great, I thought, I'll never find them.

"Here!" Shane shouted. He stood on the driveway of the first house to the left, waving at us.

Grabbing my stuff and the bike I hurried down. When I arrived, Shane was crouched on the lawn, his back to me.

West caught up to me and we both walked toward Shane.

The first thing I saw were a set of legs, they trembled.

Shane looked over his shoulder at us. He closed his eyes and

shook his head.

“Are they dead?” I asked.

“Unfortunately ... they’re still alive.”

He moved over and as I stepped forward I cast a shadow over the poor soul on the grass. Immediately, my stomach knotted and I fought to keep down what little I ate for breakfast. I couldn’t do that, I couldn’t vomit.

“One of you run in the house, look for clean sheets, something so we can move her,” Shane dictated.

“On it,” West responded and ran by me to the house.

The person was a ‘she’, I was sure, even though it really was hard to tell. I drew my conclusion from the color of her clothes, the dainty look to her legs.

She was on her stomach and she struggled, arms stretched outward. She kept lifting her head. Lift it, open her mouth, make that noise, then drop it again. *Keep it together*, I told myself. Especially since she turned her head and looked at me, locking eyes, just like Pole Man.

Her hair was gone, her face was so severely burned, her nose was gone, her eyelids as well, it wasn’t that she stared, she couldn’t close her eyes. She wasn’t charred, instead, she was burned to the point of bleeding. Her wounds glistened in the sun, fresh and foul smelling. They extended down to just below the shoulder blades, and her shirt had fused with her body. Her right arm was burned completely with her hand being the only blackened portion of her injuries. Her left arm was burnt only from shoulder to elbow.

“She probably was close enough to get shocked but not die,” Shane said. “Or was grounded a little somehow. I don’t know. Can you go help him?”

“Yeah.” I headed to the house and noticed the bloody smear, or something like it from the front porch across the grass. The poor woman had crawled, probably hoping to find help, that just wasn’t there. And then she lay in her front yard, calling for someone. We heard ... we never came.

I felt so horribly guilty.

I stepped inside, the trail continued. “West?”

“I found the linen closet. Be right there.”

The blood trail, that would tell me where it happened. I needed to know because if she was like that, how many others were, too?

I followed the path to the kitchen and it led to the open oven. On the floor was a bucket and spray bottle.

The outside of the oven was black, smoke marks extended to the cabinets on both sides.

I wasn’t sure how it happened, I could only guess. She was

cleaning the oven. Like most gas stoves it probably had an electric starter. The surge must have caused a spark that ignited her oven. I didn't know. But somehow it happened.

I felt an ache in my gut for her.

"Got them," West said quickly.

By the time I turned around he was gone and I ran out after him.

Shane had spread a sheet on the ground.

"Listen," he said gently to her. "We're gonna try to move you. To help you. It's going to hurt and I am sorry for that. But we have to try."

She whimpered.

West took hold of her feet, while Shane covered his hands with pillow cases. He grabbed her left hand then placed his hand on her other shoulder.

She tried to cry out, but all she made was a sound.

"On three," Shane said to West. "One, two ... three."

They rolled her onto her back and on the clean sheet. A move I imagined was incredibly painful. She failed at another attempt to scream. The second they had her on her back I gasped in shock and moved back when I realized it wasn't just blood on the lawn.

Her determination and perhaps even faith gave her the strength to drag herself from her kitchen, across her home and to her lawn. However, her chest was just as burned as her back, and in her attempt to drag herself to safety, she pulled every bit of flesh from her upper body, her entire chest was exposed bone.

## 13 – DECISIONS

Shane had an idea. I wasn't quite sold on it.

It stemmed from her picture, or rather was inspired by her picture.

We learned from mail that her name was Amanda, if the framed photo in the living room was any indication, she was young, about thirty. A beautiful woman with gorgeous curly brown hair, she had a dashing husband and baby girl who was around two.

She had a family, was loved and now lay dying on the front lawn of the home she probably purchased with a first buyers loan.

We didn't see the husband or the daughter, we never looked. I didn't want to. They weren't anywhere to be seen in the main living area of the house, I could only assume they were in bed when it happened.

I cried for Amanda and the pain she was in. We searched the medicine cabinet for medication, pain pills, something, but there was none. I didn't think there would be, not with a small child in the house.

They left me alone with her while they searched the two nearby homes.

I couldn't do anything but tell her I was sorry for her pain.

We were there for the duration, not one of us wanted to leave her alone. It was horrible enough what she endured, she didn't live a full life to die alone. I would hope someone would have done the same for me or my family.

West found a bottle of low milligram Xanax in the house next door and some cough medicine with codeine.

That's when Shane came up with the idea.

"She doesn't deserve this," Shane said. "I don't know her, but looking at this house, her life, she wanted much more."

"No one deserves this," I replied.

"She doesn't deserve to die out here on her lawn. I have an idea."

"Oh my God." I dropped my voice to a whisper. "You want to take her into the house and kill her."

"What? No! Why would you say that? Holy shit, Audrey." He looked at West. Obviously their exchange of glances told me he had discussed this with him already.

"What?" I asked.

"We take her to Staunton."

"The walk will be too painful."

"No." He then looked at the large SUV in the driveway, then back



at me. "I saw the keys in the house ..."

"No."

"We drive her the nine miles to Staunton."

"Oh my God, no."

"We coast. We only turn on the vehicle when going uphill."

"We saw Ralph and Doris," I argued.

West stepped forward. "We know whatever this is, it's not constant, it comes in waves."

"It's a good plan," Shane said. "I ran it by him. He knows these things. He graduated from MIT."

"I don't care if he is the fucking clone of Einstein. My answer is still no." I waved out my hands. frustrated "Amanda is going to pass. We stay with her, comfort her until she does." I turned away.

"But nine miles away is a hospital, a clinic," Shane put his hands on my shoulders and turned me to face him. "Listen to me. We put the bikes, the packs on the top rack. We put her in the back. We get there in fifteen minutes tops. Tops. Nine miles away, everything can be fine. That's nine miles closer to your end game. I know she isn't going to live, but let her last moments at least be peaceful and pain free, not slightly loopy from a codeine cough syrup we give her."

"I pray to God it is fine, but what if it's not. What if there is no one there to help her?" I asked.

"We can at least find something better to medicate her with," Shane said.

"You'll be halfway home," West added. "If there is no help there, if you don't want to stay until she passes, you're closer to home."

"She pulled herself burnt like that." Shane pointed. "What it took for her to get from her house to the lawn. It tore her apart wanting help. She did that. The least we can do is try this. My gut tells me we will be fine. I feel it. We won't do this without you."

I stepped back and looked down at Amanda. We had covered her with another sheet, but it was sticking to her and her body trembled. I thought about how if that were my sister, my husband, what would I want three strangers to do. Risk their lives to give my family member an hour or so of no pain?

I wouldn't want them to risk their lives.

Shane and West were passionate about it, so certain we'd be fine.

Amanda cried again, a short piercing cry filled with her agony.

Arms folded tight to my body, I looked at Shane. "Get the car ready."

## 14 – THE BOBBY JOE

When I first realized it wasn't over, when I saw Ralph and Doris, I likened the situation to unknowingly playing Russian Roulette. I had no idea what that meant until I got in the SUV.

We folded down the driver's side rear passenger seat allowing Amanda to lie comfortably in the back, her head close to me as I sat in the seat next to her. I was given the option of sitting up front, but I chose not to.

In fact, I even contemplated only getting in the vehicle when it was off, walking up the hill and making them wait. But since Shane and West were taking that chance, I would as well.

West had handed me a half of Xanax, I never had taken one before and didn't know what to expect. If it was supposed to calm me, it was failing.

The second Shane turned over that ignition, my heart start pounding. They had to feel it as well, they did.

I could barely breathe when we drove up the first incline. At the top, Shane shut off the ignition and froze. He exhaled loudly, a breath of relief, looked at me then West and then let the SUV roll. It wasn't any less stressful or tense. Cars were in the road and Shane swerved several times.

I believed I was going to die one way or another on that nine mile trip.

When he needed to start the vehicle again, I held my breath. Beginning a mantra in my mind, 'please God, just let us get there. Let us get there.'

There was no feeling of ease at all, the stress was worse with each crank of the engine. To me, it really was Russian Roulette and every time the motor ran, we were rotating the cylinder. When we made it to the coasting portion, it was the click of the trigger without the bang.

My head started to hurt from the stress and tension, my jaw was sore from clenching down. If that little pill was actually doing anything for me, I hated to think of how I would feel if I hadn't taken it.

Amanda surprised me, she was still alive. She hung on. It wasn't that it was that long of a trip, it just felt like it.

No one spoke, not a single word.

My hands shook out of control, and I felt like tremors shot through my body. I wondered if I'd feel anything if it happened or would I go quickly.

Staunton was our goal. It was far enough away from Gridlock and that area, surely it had to be fine. That was the assumption we moved on.

As we neared Staunton we knew that wasn't the case.

Staunton was a small town with big aspirations. Everything a larger city had including traffic was there, and it was jammed into a pile up just off the main road. We were able to go through. Sporadic fires burned through the town creating a hovering veil of smoke. Probably, like the diner, things were cooking when it happened and they burned.

I was so disheartened by what I saw I forgot for a second we were in a ticking time bomb.

On the first corner, after entering town, there was a large chain drug store, Shane pulled over and turned off the car.

He held his hand on the ignition and lowered his head. I could see the sweat on his brow. If it was the longest seventeen minutes of my life, I could only imagine how he felt.

Staunton was a bust. There was no help to be found, no one was alive, not that we could see.

Shane was the first to step out, then me.

West got out last, shaking his head. "I thought ... I really thought, even though I knew better, I thought we'd hit an end to it. I hoped this was it."

"What do we do?" I asked.

Shane pointed to the drug store. "I'm gonna go in there and get something for her," he said defeated. "That's all I can do."

"We should move her," I suggested. "It's hot. If we're going to make her comfortable then let's do it."

Shane nodded in agreement then walked inside. He emerged a few minutes later, and he and West gently carried Amanda into the store.

A table was up front, the items that had been on it were sprawled out on the floor, on top of the table was a blanket and they placed Amanda on it.

I stayed with her while Shane and West searched out the pharmacy.

"We tried," I told her. "We tried. They're going to find something for you. For the pain."

I was in a dilemma. Stay with her until she passed away or go and try to find my family. I was close, so close to home. Shane and West were there for her, it felt morbid to stand over her watching, waiting. Especially me, would I subconsciously be hoping she'd die faster so I could go? Not wanting to know the answer to that I informed them I was leaving. I was headed home.

They both understood and I left them my address.

My home town was only ten miles away, I didn't hold high hopes that it was unaffected, but I had to see.

West rode with me for about five miles, then we parted ways. I didn't expect to see him again and I thanked him as if it were the last time we'd speak.

I prayed in my mind, each pump of the peddle. 'Let them be alive, let everything be alright.'

I focused forward even my pace was good. Although, I probably wouldn't be able to maintain it. I couldn't. I slowed down after a couple of miles, but when I saw the sign for my town I was charged again and adrenaline rushed through my veins.

That was short lived, but I made it home.

Staunton was the first bigger town we had come across, Waynesboro was much smaller, but it was the same situation. Cars on the road, smoke in the air, people on the ground.

I clenched my jaw to fight the ache that crept up my chest.

Our house was three blocks from a four-way intersection. At the intersection a telephone pole lay toppled and eight cars were crammed into one big smash up.

I didn't want to go down my street, but I did. My home was nine houses down, and before I even got there I could see my car in the driveway and what Ken and I called 'The Bobby Joe' set up on the lawn.

Ken had a cousin, Bobby Joe who used to perch two lawn chairs on the front yard, a cooler between them and shout conversation across the street to the neighbors. Bobby Joe died a few years earlier in an accident. At first it was a running joke, but after Bobby died, it was a tribute. Every summer Ken would have the set up in the front yard, two chairs and a cooler. Our neighbors would do the same.

When I saw the chairs and cooler I figured Ken had been out there that first night. Molly's toys were there as well. They had been out late and left them when he went in, figuring he'd get them in the morning.

That obviously never happened.

Like everywhere else it was quiet, too quiet.

My lips quivered and I fought back the tears. Where was the noise, the children playing?

I headed up the walk to my front door and I stopped.

It was the middle of the day and I heard nothing.

For all that had happened, I still held out hope that they would be alive and well, that Michael would be there. I didn't see his bike.

Suddenly, I felt my insides crumble when I realized my life was done.

I didn't know for sure what was behind that front door, but I had a good idea and I stepped back.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to walk in my own house to find my family.

I wasn't ready and I didn't know if I ever would be.

## 15 – A SPECIAL QUIET

There were four indentations in the lawn next to the Bobby Joe chair set up. I ran my fingers over them, knowing they could only have been made by the pack and play. The portable play yard was a godsend. We brought it out a lot when we lawn sat in the summer.

Ken must have had Molly outside for a while that evening. I wondered who he talked to, why he was out so long. Probably a long-winded debate with Jeremy across the street, complaining about baseball. Or Roy three houses down, he came down quite a bit to talk. Sometimes sitting with Ken, other times sitting with Jeremy. It depended on what side of the argument he wanted to take. Roy was funny. He wasn't much older than us, but he acted like he was. He had lost a good part of his hearing when he served our country. We had to keep reminding him to put in his hearing aid, even though we found his loud talking funny, it was annoying when he couldn't hear us and kept saying, 'What?' He insisted the internet was the beginning of man's downfall. Maybe Roy was right. I had no idea what caused the immediate dead hush that took over the world. I probably would never know.

I hope that the final night Ken had was a good one. I hoped he laughed and had a great time. I hoped Molly fell asleep in his arms, just after cuddling and telling him 'wuv you'.

He deserved it.

I wasn't there, so he didn't rush to clean up the lawn decorations. The cooler still had four beers inside. Despite that they were warm, I drank one, then another. I turned the Bobby Joe chairs away from facing the street to facing my house.

I hadn't gone in. With no plans to do so, not yet, I made myself comfortable on my lawn. I had that small blanket in my pack and I covered up with it. I wasn't in a hurry to go anywhere.

I was home.

My next course of action remained to be seen.

I'd wait at the house a little bit, maybe Michael would show up. Perhaps he had returned to the house, found Ken and Molly then headed back to Gridlock. Surely he would look for me? Just like I needed to look for him. If both of us were searching, would we ever find each other? What was the solution?

By the third beer, it hadn't gotten dark and I could barely keep my eyes open. I didn't know if the Xanax was still in my system, I doubted it, but I was tired and fell into a dead sleep.

When I woke, I was chilly and stiff. The reality of what I faced

was right in front of me. I stood from the chair and stretched, grabbing the last beer as my morning coffee.

Several times, I stood and walked to the house, but stopped short of going in.

There was a finality that I just didn't want to face. Not only that, I don't believe I was strong enough to see my dead family.

I was holding a total breakdown at bay, and I knew the second I saw them, it was going to cause my meltdown.

When I thought about how cowardly I was being, I thought of Amanda. How brave and strong she was. I paled in comparison to her. And I left her. How pathetic that I walked away only to sit on my front lawn, afraid of my destiny while drinking old skank beer.

It was late in the day, almost approaching another evening when I finally I made up my mind. I would go into the house. As hard as it would be, I needed to find out for sure.

The plastic of the lawn chair stuck to me when I stood and it fell over. Good lord how long was I sitting in that chair?

When I bent down to pick it up, I nearly fell over with it when I saw Shane and West pushing their bikes down my street.

It was such a relief to see them. I really didn't think they'd find me. I lifted my hand in a wave and they headed my way. They looked tired, and moved slowly.

They brought their bikes up on the curb toward my lawn.

West paused and looked at the police tape that was still set up by my driveway from when Pole Man met his end. I was so consumed with the Bobby Joe set and house, I didn't pay attention to that.

"I'm ... I'm so glad to see you two," I said, and even embraced them both. "I didn't think you'd come."

"Why not?" Shane asked. "We said we would. How ... how are you?" He lowered his head and looked at me through the tops of his eyes.

"I'm doing. I was hopeful, you know, that everything would be normal here. Obviously, it's not. I'm beginning to think it's everywhere. Some sort of global thing we can't control."

"Yeah, me, too."

I shifted my eyes from Shane to West. "How was Amanda?"

West answered, "She passed really early this morning. We kept her drugged, you know, but she held on. What a testament to human will. It's kinda heartbreaking. She really wanted to live."

"I wish I had an ounce of her strength," I said.

"Are you kidding me?" Shane smiled. "You do."

"No, really, I don't. I have been here a day and I can't bring myself to go into my own house. I can't ... I can't find my family. Finding strangers is one thing, seeing those you love, is another."

Shane looked at the house. "I get that."

"Look," West said. "We're here now. It's the fear of the unknown, it's fear of what you'll see. You have to go in there eventually but ... why don't I go in first. I go in so I can prepare you. Will that help?"

"That ... that would be amazing. Just knowing what I am walking into ..."

"Say no more." West held up his hand. "This way I can prepare you."

"Thank you."

West gave a single nod and turned toward the house.

I watched as he walked inside and closed the door. I stood on the lawn with Shane and said nothing. I imagined West walking through my home, seeing Ken, finding Molly. Coming out to tell me what he found.

A few minutes later West walked out, closing the door.

My heart raced so fast and hard, the beating filled my ears.

Shane put his arm around my shoulder for strength as West neared us.

Perplexed.

That was the best way I could think of to describe the look on West's face. Perplexed.

The air felt thick and I struggled to breathe normal, every bit of me shook.

"So, uh ..." West paused to scratch his head. "They aren't there."

Stop.

I literally felt my heart stop and all the air I had been breathing in rushed out with a single word, "What?"

"They... they ... aren't there," West said nervously. "I looked. You can look. No bodies. Nothing. No one is in the house."

"How ... how can that be?" I asked.

"Would they go somewhere else on Friday?" Shane asked. "Maybe visit family."

"No. The chairs are set up. Friday night lawn talks," I said. "The car is still ..." I turned to look at the driveway and paused. "Oh my God."

Sounding panicked, Shane asked. "What's wrong."

I shook my head then pointed to the police tape. "Oh my God, I wasn't thinking. The utility guy. The one that died right here Friday, blew the transformer."

West closed his eyes. "You had no power."

"We had no power."

"No electricity" Shane said. "No means to send the current."

"They didn't die." I smiled then the smile dropped. "So where are they?"



## 16 – RACKET

Despite being certain that Ken and Molly were alive and just gone, I still had to see for myself. Admittedly, it was nerve wracking, checking every corner, closet, even under the beds.

Like West had said, they were nowhere to be found.

Neither were the diapers, wipes, bottles and toddler snacks. The entire carton of cigarettes Ken had purchased and left on the counter were gone, as well as the bottle of Jim Beam.

After confirming they weren't in the house, I started looking for what else was missing.

A few clothing items, a couple pictures, it seemed Ken took what he could carry in a backpack or duffel bag. The pack and play was in the living room open with a blanket, so wherever he went he couldn't take much.

There was so much left behind, but one thing wasn't ... a note.

That infuriated me. Had it been me and Molly leaving, I would have left word.

Now not only was my son was missing, I was placed in the position where I had to find Ken and Molly as well.

"Nothing," West announced after he had checked the neighborhood with Shane. "Not a single person or body."

"On this street or next," Shane said. "Only body we saw was in a car at the other end of the street. Looks like they were hit with the current and veered into a house. How about here?"

"Nothing," I said. "He took stuff. Not a lot."

"It seems the whole neighborhood left in a rush," Shane said. "Okay you know your husband. What would his priority be?"

"To get Molly safe. Then he'd worry about me."

"He obviously took her to safety. The whole neighborhood went," Shane said. "That's a large group of people so we should have no problem finding them."

"What about your son?" West asked. "Any indication he was here?"

I shook my head. "None. I have places to look for him. He didn't have his own apartment. He slept at different places. But it was always one of five places in town."

"That's a first step," West said. "It's getting dark, so first thing in the morning we look at those places. Beyond that, we need a plan."

"If it were me," Shane said. "And I left my mom and this thing happened, the first thing I'd do would be to go find her. I think he headed back to Gridlock."

"If he's still alive," I said.

"Let's operate on the assumption that he is," suggested Shane.

"Thank you." I looked at them both. "Thank you guys so much."

West placed his hand on my arm. "Right now, we can all breathe easier and relax. Nothing we can do until sunup. Let's make the best of this night and get the rest we will need."

I couldn't agree more.

I was home and it was different from staying in the church. I had a level of comfort being here. I knew where everything was and what I had. Using the grill I heated us a nice supper and made coffee with the bottled water.

There was still water left in my tank, although it was cold, I used it to wash. It felt good to get clean and the cold water was a relief in the heat.

After dinner, I started the task of packing items and writing the note in case Ken returned or Michael showed up. I listed the addresses of the places we would hit in town to look for Michael and gave them to West who seemed to be focused on plotting our course.

He was obsessed with the maps and spent an unusual amount of time looking at them at the dining room table and marking them. But I figured it was his way of not being bored.

We used candles for lighting, but had to keep the windows open to bring in some sort of air. A breeze started after ten pm, but it wasn't enough for a comfortable temperature for sleeping.

I thought about lying in bed, but the heat on the second floor was stifling.

It probably was that way Friday night without power. Hence why the bed was untouched, Ken and the baby probably slept in the living room.

However, the living room was too warm for me to sleep. Shane was crashed on the sofa, it didn't bother him. I considered placing a lounge chair on the back porch and sleeping there. There was one in the garage, I'd go and grab it.

I did more meandering around my house than anything else. Finding things to do while fighting the million thoughts that raced through my mind. There was nothing left to do but try to rest, I couldn't pack anymore, it was too dark.

I blew out the candle in the living room and walked to the dining room where West was seated with a couple candles.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey." He looked up.

"I'm gonna try to sleep on the back porch. It's too hot in here."

"Tell me about it." He lifted his water and took a sip.

I sat down at the table, a kid's marker set was there. "Coloring?" I

asked.

"You can say that."

My eyes shifted to the map. He had a ton of little red dots with circles around them. Next to the map he had a compass. Not one used to determine north or south, the kind used in school to make a perfect circle. "Where did you get that?" I asked.

"I always have one with my maps." He smiled.

"Listen, West," I folded my hands on the table. "I want to thank you. I am really fortunate to have you and Shane helping me."

"Don't take this the wrong way," he said, focused on marking the map. "But what else do we have to do?"

"Look for family, maybe."

He peered up to me briefly. "For me no. None to look for. I'm glad to be here."

I noticed he went right back to work on the map. "You are really working hard on charting our course."

"It's more me working from memory."

I didn't understand what he meant by that. "Memory?"

He set down his pen. "Audrey, we are going to look for your family. But we may have a bigger problem to deal ..."

He stopped talking and my attention was quickly diverted from our conversation when I heard it.

It sounded like a lawn mower starting and it transitioned into a steady hum.

In the dead quiet of night it was loud.

I jumped up at the same time as West and raced out of the dining room.

Shane sat up on the couch. "What was that?"

"Sounds like a generator," West said.

Shane bolted from the couch and we all ran outside.

The sound was louder and then it doubled with another hum. They came from our right. Sure enough, three doors up, a generator was perched in a red wagon on the front lawn, a power cord ran to the home of Roy.

Shane looked at the generator. "Would that count as electricity?"

"Maybe not as much as what it's connected to," West said.

"We should shut it down," Shane said.

"Go on." West nodded.

"You do it."

"No you."

I reached down and hit the switch, jumping back in fear after touching it.

"What the hell! Fifteen minutes of air conditioning that's all I want!" Roy yelled from the house. A few thumps of footsteps and the

front door flew open. "What in the world is ..." he stopped cold and looked right at me. "Audrey, is that you?"

"My God, Roy, you're alive." I stepped to him. "Where is everyone?"

"What?" he blasted.

I laughed at his not hearing me, but it was more of a chuckle of relief. I raced to him and hugged him. He was alive and probably had the answers that I needed.

## 17 – CONTACT

After a snap and a pop, the foam of the beer seeped out of the can and I quickly sucked it up. It wasn't ice cold, but it wasn't warm, it was refreshing.

West had asked him at least three times if he knew what was going on, but Roy insisted on getting those beverages.

"Drink up," Roy said. "I had them in the basement commode so they're chilled." He handed a beer to Shane and West as we sat on his front porch.

"Where were you?" I asked. "I've been here over a day."

"What?"

I spoke louder. "I said where were you? I didn't see you!"

"Oh. I went out to get that generator from Ace. It was too hot in the house, I figured fifteen minutes, I'd risk it."

"I was out there all last night! All day! Did you see me?"

"I saw you last night in the chair. Thought you were a dead body. Seen so many I didn't get close enough to look. Hold on...." He reached into his tee shirt pocket and pulled out his hearing aid, turned it on and placed it in his ear. "There. That's better."

Shane looked at West. "Do you think that's safe for him?"

Roy answered. "It's safe. It's also a damn good indicator for some reason. Anyhow, to answer your question. Yep. Sort of know what's going on. Sort of. I was reading my paper when it started. I was awake, but you didn't need to be in this town. I heard the loud crash down at the intersection, as if it was right outside my door. When I ran out, like a lot of people, I saw a plane just free falling, almost sailing from the sky." He sipped his beer. "Right away, we thought it was an EMP attack. I mean," he then looked at me. "When you killed that electric company worker."

"I didn't kill that worker."

"People are blaming you. Said you distracted him. He touched the wire. That transformer blew and so did the one on the next street. None of us had power."

"It wasn't an EMP," West said.

"Hell, I know that," Roy replied. "See, a bunch of us ran into town. It's only a couple blocks away. But the people in the cars weren't the only ones dead. We ran into the donut shop, people in there had died, a couple folks on the street. It became a mystery, it wasn't an EMP. Everyone was talking. Tossing out theories. But only for a minute. Well maybe more than a minute. I had read in the paper about that apartment building in India, I brought that up, how no one

was able to explain it. Because it's never happened, especially on this scale, we all were convinced it was a weapon. That's when Ted Jenkins decided he was going to go and see how far it went. He made it about the end of the street and he died. Electrocuted."

"There has to be an explanation," I said and looked at West.

"I'm working on it," West replied.

"Whatever happened," Roy said. "Happened in little spurts, then the big one. There are more little ones happening. That's how Ted got hit."

Shane shook his head. "I don't get it. I mean, how are people getting electrocuted in their cars. West, you went to MIT, come on, what's the answer here?"

"So many components in a car are electrical," West answered. "Every car in the last decade or so runs on computer. I would say the amount of electronics in the car would determine how much of the ... for lack of better word ... surge it absorbs. Probably overload and it just lights everything up."

"That's why all the cars are still here," Roy told us. "Mayor Henderson was spared, and he made the decision to evacuate. We weren't sure how safe the area was."

"Do you know where everyone went?" I asked.

"East, that's all I know," Roy answered. "Trying to find someplace safe, unaffected, with power for those who needed it to stay alive."

"When did they leave? Did they walk?" I asked.

"They left Saturday afternoon and they didn't walk. Took some trucks, we got horses from Lakes Farm and attached them to carts."

"You took trucks?" Shane asked. "That's not safe. You saw what happened to the one guy."

"These trucks were old."

"Still," Shane said. "You can't be sure. Why take that chance? All cars run on some sort of electrical component, even before computers."

Roy waved his finger. "Not necessarily one hundred percent true. You have cars from before 1975, about the only electrical components were the radio and the spark plugs that sent the charge to the ignition. Skeet the mechanic ..." Roy looked at me. "One street over, he came up with that and said if we removed the radio, the most it would cause would be a short in the ignition, or a little shock."

West shook his head. "No, that isn't right. Whatever is powerful enough to surge through here is going to hit you and kill you no matter what kind of car you're in. In essence the vehicle is working like a reverse faraday cage."

Roy looked smug. "You're wrong. We tested it."

"How did you test it?" West asked.

“Crazy Sarge. How old is sarge?” Roy looked at me.

I shrugged. “Eighty maybe, but he doesn’t drive. They took his license when he reversed into the Big Bear Supermarket’s front window.”

“He drove Saturday,” Roy said. “Volunteered and put his balls on the line. Told us he was ready to take one for the team and he’d lived long enough. Skeet removed the radio, and sure enough after thirty minutes of driving in circles, one of those incidents happened. The truck stopped, but Sarge was able to manually pump the brakes. The ignition shorted out, Sarge said he felt a pinch, and Skeet fixed the ignition. So Skeet was right and he didn’t have a degree from MIT.”

“This is good to know,” I said. “It means we don’t have to walk.”

Roy tilted his head. “I wouldn’t be so certain. There were only four trucks in the area. They’re gone now. But hey, if you want to take a car that works, I have an extra hearing aid. Not so sure it will give you enough time to get out of the truck though.”

“What are you talking about?” West asked.

“It was when the thing hit Sarge that I realized my hearing aid was picking it up about three to five seconds before the electrocution. At first I thought the old hearing aid was bad, but when the new one got the same rush of static, I knew what it was. And I didn’t need to graduate from MIT to figure it out.”

“Okay, alright,” West said. “And it’s not me bringing up MIT. So, we have an early warning system with the hearing aids. It isn’t much but it works. Question though, Roy, have you been near anything electronic when you had the warning.”

Roy shook his head. “Nope. Sarge was the closest and that was a block away.”

“Just do me a favor,” said West. “If you are near something electronic, take it out right away if it gives warning.”

Very seriously, Roy looked at him. “Would this be the MIT man in you talking?”

“Enough. Just take it out.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?” I asked.

“Someone is supposed to come back for me. Right now, I’m manning the radio three times a day trying to find someone. No luck yet. Speaking of which ...” he stood. “I’m overdue for the midnight call out. It’s battery operated.” He winked. “I’m being careful. I’m headed in. I’ll see you all in the morning.”

I thought we were in a deep conversation, but Roy ended it abruptly. He did however give us conversation fodder until we all decided to sleep. My beer was half full, I thanked him and took it with me.

After Roy had gone in the house, we stepped from his porch.

Shane stopped walking. "Do you think the radio is safe? If he's calling out, it has to be a big battery."

"Probably is a big battery," West answered. "But I'd worry more about the antenna."

I cringed. "Let me go and warn him. I'll be back. Wait here." I turned and went back on the porch. After knocking and receiving no answer, I stepped inside. "Roy?" I called out. I didn't see him, but I heard him. He was speaking in call signs and saying he was looking for anyone out there. Following the sound of his voice, I located him in a room off the kitchen. It was a nice size office. There was a desk and on a counter behind the desk was a radio connected to a car battery. The radio was perched in the far corner of the room near a window and Roy sat in a swivel chair in front of it. I could see the wires running out of the window. Probably to that antenna I was there to warn him about.

"Roy," I called again, then as I stepped in the room, I saw his hearing aid on the desk. No wonder he didn't have luck with the radio, he probably didn't hear anyone replying. I moved another five feet to behind Roy and I reached out, gently tapping him on the shoulder.

With a shriek, Roy jumped in his chair and even scared me, making me jump as well.

Laughing, I put my hand to my chest. "Sorry to scare you. We were ..."

Roy held up his hand, rolled his chair from the radio and grabbed his hearing aid, placing it in as he rolled back. "Aw, that's better. What's up?"

"We were ..."

"Audrey!" Shane shouted from outside. "You guys have got to see this. Get Roy."

"Anyhow," I said. "West was worried about the antennae and we wanted you to have a heads up."

"Audrey!" Shane yelled again, this time sounding closer. "Hurry before it's done."

"Tell them I thought about the antenna and ..." Roy paused, his eyes widened with fear and his finger went to his ear.

"Audrey," Shane's voice was near. "Did you hear me?"

I looked over to see Shane standing in the doorway at the same time I felt the rush of static electricity and looked down to see the hair on my arms standing on edge. "Shit." My first instinct was to grab hold of Roy's chair and pull him away from the radio. Hand on that chair, I just started to pull when I felt it.

It took only a split second.

Everything rippled before my eyes as what felt like a million



burning needles ripped into my chest and through my body with such an intense force, my feet lifted from the floor and flew backwards.

That was all. Nothing after that.

Everything went black.

## 18 – NEEDED PAUSE

Breathe.

It was all a cascade of voices and flashing of faces, one right after another, some overlapping, everything flashing before me as if I were a camera taking photographs.

*“Hi there!” It was that annoying talking elephant of Molly’s, the one with the girl’s voice. “My name is Ba-Ba-Blue, what’s your name?”*

*“Can’t you see what he’s doing to you?” Ken stared at me.*

*“You’re pathetic, Mom. Don’t cry over me,” Michael blasted, eyes red, as he swayed back and forth.*

*“Are you ready to play?”*

Breathe.

*“Look at him. He’s on a path of self destruction.”*

*“You’re not a mother. Never were.”*

*“Let’s read a story!”*

Breathe.

*“I don’t want him around Molly,” Ken said.*

*“He’s my son.”*

*“She’s my daughter.”*

*“Mine, too.”*

*“Act like it. Can’t you see what he’s doing to you?”*

*“I hate you, Mom.”*

*“He’s killing you.”*

Goddamn it, Audrey, breathe!

I released an outward wheezing breath, then panicked as I opened my eyes and was unable to inhale. After a few attempts, arms flailing, I started coughing.

*“West, get me the oxygen.”*

Shane’s voice sounded distant, like in an echo chamber. I felt something come near my face, in my confusion I didn’t recognize it as oxygen and I swatted it away. The moment I did, I felt a horrendous burning in my hand.

*“Don’t fight. Don’t fight me.” Shane put the oxygen near my face. “Breathe. Breathe.”*

I did and then I closed my eyes.

That instance, maybe it lasted a minute or two, was rushed and I was in such a state of confusion I hadn’t a clue to what was going on. I felt a sense of clarity when I opened my eyes later to a room brightened with daylight. I also felt a crushing pain in my chest the second I moved.

*“Whoa, whoa, wait.” West rushed over. “If you need to sit up let*

me help you. I have another ice pack for you.”

I shifted my eyes, I was in my own living room on the couch. I felt a tingle and some dryness in my nostrils. I reached up and saw my hand was bandaged.

“You got burned pretty good,” West said. “I don’t think it’s anything that won’t heal. Now that you’re awake we can get you to take some antibiotics. But don’t move. Not yet. Give me a minute.”

“Can you take this out of my nose?”

“Can you breathe?”

“Yeah.”

West removed it. He then lowered the sheet. I was already laying semi propped up. He sat on the coffee table next to me and began to unwrap a cloth bandage from my chest. After I was bandage free, he took several white ice packs off me and replaced them with new ones. When they touched my chest I felt the cold. West began to bandage me up again. “Let me know if this is too tight.”

I nodded. Even that hurt. I winced.

“We have pain medication for you.”

“Where did you get the oxygen?” I asked.

“This one ... same place I got the pills and the instant compresses ... the drug store. Last night we used Roy’s portable tank.”

“Did I die?”

“Well ... hard to say. Did you want to try to sit up?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll do it slowly, and I’ll put pillows behind you. Ready?”

I signaled with a nod of my head that I was, and West gently lifted me from behind, placing more cushions against my back. It hurt like hell, but when I relaxed and didn’t move, it wasn’t as excruciating.

“You stopped breathing, your heart stopped and you turned fifty shades of blue pretty quickly. Had Shane not been right there, yeah, you probably would have died. You just had a momentary vital sign cessation.” He handed me some pills. “Take those. One is for pain, one is an antibiotic” He held the water bottle for me.

I put the two pills, one blue the other white into my mouth and took a drink of the water. It was hard to swallow and for a second they got stuck in my throat, I hurriedly took another swig. I cringed as I felt them go down every inch of my esophagus. “For how long?”

“Not long. He yelled for me and was doing CPR when I came in. Maybe a couple minutes. It wasn’t long,” West said.

“Roy?”

West shook his head. “We couldn’t save him. We tried. He was too close.”

Instantly I panicked. “I didn’t ask him,” I said grabbing West’s arm. “I didn’t ask him, West. I let him talk, I should have asked him

first and foremost. He just rambled and I didn't stop him to ask."

"Ask what?"

"About my family."

"Audrey, he said the mayor evacuated the town. They were looking for a place with power for those who need it. He said that. I would think if something would have happened with your family he would have mentioned it then. Don't worry."

I tried to move. "We have to go. I have to look for my family. I have to look for Michael."

West stopped me. "You're not going anywhere. Not today at least. You aren't moving. You have a pretty nasty burn that we can't chance getting infected and you also took some trauma to the chest. I need you to rest and keep that oxygen on."

"It bothers my nose."

"Keep it on anyway." West raised it to my nostrils.

"Hey, she's up," Shane said as he walked into the living room. "Wow, should her color still be that bad?"

"What's wrong with my color?"

"You're a little pale." West winked. "Oxygen should help that."

"I can't just lay here," I said.

"Yes you can," West argued. "Can we trust you to just lay here and relax, or do one of us have to babysit you?"

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"You gave me this list last night." West held up a sheet of paper. "Remember?"

"West and I are gonna go look to see if Michael is at one of those houses." Shane said. "We found a picture on your fridge. We know what he looks like. We also want to scour the perimeter around town, look for the bike. You said you know the license plate."

"MM-6980, Virginia plate," I replied.

Shane took the paper from West's hand and wrote on it. "We'll look. We will check this entire town. If he made it here, we'll find him."

"You said he left the camp two hours before the event, right?" West asked. "Then if this is where he headed, we're gonna try like hell to see if he made it."

"What about Molly and Ken and the rest of town?"

"One day ... one plan at a time." West handed me the water. "Sip on this."

"Thank you. Thank you for everything." I looked at Shane. "Thank you for saving my life."

"It was easy," Shane said. "You weren't ready or wanting to go anywhere ... you came right back."

Treating me like a child they made sure I was settled before they

left. I hated feeling so useless, but every time I moved another part of my body ached. I was drained, and the pains in my body were battling to see which part would take top billing.

The last thing I wanted to do was be the weight they had to drag around, the weak woman, damsel in distress. I vowed after they left I would give myself one day. Then after that, pain or not, I was going to get up and keep moving.

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The pain medication kicked in and I was out like a light for some time. Long enough for the temperature and lighting to change in the house and for the cold packs to be not as cool. I was still alone in the house, Shane and West hadn't returned. I felt horribly uncomfortable and decided I needed to sit up. Other than that, I swore I felt better and a bit stronger.

I moved slowly. First with my legs, inching them off the couch. Then I took a deep breath, my ribs hurt as they expanded, and I slid my way into a sitting position. Once there, I panted, as if in labor, until the pain eased.

I glanced down to the bandage on my hand. If the burn looked anything like it felt, I wasn't sure I wanted to see it. I couldn't feel my middle and ring fingers, surely they were still there. There wasn't any blood on the bandage, yet I still couldn't feel them.

The front door opened and Shane stopped in his stride. "Why are you sitting up?"

"Did I lose my two fingers?" I asked.

"No. Why?" he asked.

"I can't feel them."

"They're burned pretty bad," he said. "Just don't look at your hand. Not yet."

"How bad are they?"

"Bad. Take a pain pill now before you start feeling it again."

"I will." I peered around for my water bottle. It must have fallen while I slept. "Where's West?"

Shane pointed backwards just as West walked in.

"Well?" I asked.

West looked at Shane and they both walked to me.

My stomach dropped. They were hesitant.

"We checked those places," West said. "Michael wasn't there. One of the homes. The one just across town. No one was there, at all. No

bodies. Nothing. Before you freak out ... you have to hear what we have to say. Okay?"

"Okay."

Shane slowly extended a motorcycle license plate to me.

I hated to look, but I did.

MM-6980.

It was Michael's. I clutched it in my hands, closed my eyes and brought it close to my chest. "Where?" I whimpered.

"I told you not to freak out," West said. "Didn't I? Anyhow ... we found the bike on sixty-four, it would have been the route he took from Gridlock. About two miles out of town. It wasn't in a pile-up and it wasn't wrecked. In fact, it was on the side of the road resting against the guardrail."

"We think he abandoned it," Shane said. "It was out of gas. No keys anywhere."

"There were tracks on the shoulder. He must have walked it for a while," West explained. "We didn't go any further than another half a mile. But I am going to guess he ran out of gas long before that."

"He gave up and walked or ... he watched the thing hit, then just ditched the bike and ran into town."

"And don't think we didn't look," West said. "We searched the highway and the embankment. No body."

"Either way. He made it here."

"You said you didn't ask Roy. If you had he would have told you Michael made it. I really believe he would have."

"I think when we find Ken and Molly, you'll find Michael."

Both men stood before me and my head went back and forth as I listened to them talk as if they had rehearsed what they were going to say. I believed what they told me, I heard every word. One would think with the knowledge they gave me along with hearing Roy say the street was evacuated, I would be on cloud nine, screaming, "yes, my family is alive."

But I wasn't.

I just couldn't bring myself to feel hopeful.

## 19 – SETTING A PATH

I thought maybe it was the drugs or the pain, or even the fact that I nearly died that caused the shadow of gloom to hang over my head, but as the day moved on the shadow remained. In fact, by evening I was feeling stronger and thinking pretty clearly.

It was ironic that I was searching again for my son, like I had done so many times before in the past. Once again someone reassuring me he was fine. Yet, where was he?

I was never optimistic when it came to Michael. For two years I had been preparing myself for the worst, waiting on that day when the call would come, telling me my son was dead.

Sleeping with the phone next to my head, because I was certain one night I'd get that dreaded phone call.

Now, he could be gone and I would spend the rest of my life never knowing what happened.

The only thing I did know was Ken and Michael were not together, despite what Shane and West believed. Even if Michael wasn't dead and if his body hadn't been thrown all over the highway like many others, if he had indeed made it to Waynesboro, I knew instantly he wasn't with Ken.

They despised each other. The last thing Michael would do would run to our house and face Ken with the news that he left me behind and alone.

No way.

In fact, every scenario in my mind kept playing out with the same end result ... Michael being dead.

If Michael made it to town before the event, I figured he was racked with guilt over leaving me. He probably was trying to call Charlie at the camp and was somewhere surrounded by electronics.

Or if Michael made it to town and witnessed the event, like West suggested, he still wouldn't run to Ken, Michael would have found a car and drove it to get me, eventually being caught in one of those surges on the highway, in a car I'd never find.

More than likely I was giving Michael more credit than I should, especially by believing my son was not selfish and cared about me enough to feel guilt, or to even come find me. The old Michael would have. But I hadn't seen the old Michael for a long time.

I kept those thoughts to myself and his license plate with me.

Holding the plate was like holding a little bit of my son.

By supper I felt strong enough to make my way to the table, I even felt a little hungry. West informed me he wanted to fill me in on the plan and would do so over a meal. It was too hot to eat when the sun was up, but it cooled down when night rolled in. Shane made a nice dinner out of things he found in my cupboards. He made vegetables, soup and formed canned chicken into patties and cooked them on the grill.

It didn't dawn on us the night before about the starter on my gas grill, we just opted for old fashioned cooking out with charcoal from the local store.

I supposed we would have to rethink a lot of old habits.

As we dove into our dinners, the map sat center of the table, West dropped a hearing aid on it. "It's not a failsafe warning system, but it will work. It will be our alarm. Not to stop us from electrocution, but to save the car's ignition."

"What car?" I asked.

"We found an old Dodge Dart. Tomorrow morning we're gonna take out the radio and get it ready," West said. "Then when you're ready we'll head out."

"I'm ready. I'll be ready. What's the plan?" I asked.

"Not that it's a booming metropolis," West replied. "But Charlottesville is about twice the size of this town. If that's hit, it's gonna be safe to assume so is the whole state. I think we'll start seeing more people the further we get from the mountains. Let's face it, there will be people that didn't have power or were off the grid, farmers who were working in their fields, or people who unplug every electronic when they go to bed. They're out there. They'll be setting up camps, trying to figure out what's next."

I pointed to the map. "Roy said they went East. There are two routes they would have taken."

"We'll take one," Shane said. "Loop around."

"Do you think they're headed to Charlotte or even Roanoke?" I asked.

"Or Apex Power," West pointed. "It's about forty miles from here. It's a wind farm. Windmills. But they still produce electricity. Then again, people may not be thinking that way. Like us with the grill. They may start generators ... like Roy."

"We're gonna find them," Shane said. "There is probably a large group traveling together with children. They're probably stopping a lot. They'll set up somewhere. But I will tell you this, we are going to head southeast first."

"Is there a reason?" I asked.

"Yeah, there is. Answers." Shane stood. "Confirmation." He walked to the sliding glass doors of the dining room and opened them.



“Is it?” West asked him.

“Yes.” He peered out and then when he looked at me he extended his hand. “Come take a look,” Shane said. “We think we figured out why this is happening.”

## 20 - IT DOESN'T GET ANY BETTER

For as damning as I knew it was, the spectacle in the sky was absolutely amazing. Swirls of greenish blue streaked across the sky. I had heard about them, but had never seen them.

"Auroras," Shane explained. "They are caused by coronal something or other."

"Mass ejection." West said as he stepped out on the back porch. "Solar storms, geomagnetic storms. This ..." he pointed up. "is nothing like we saw last night. It was like another sky. It started like this, but then just went nuts. Lit up everything. None of us saw this the day of the big event, because it was daylight and sunny."

"How would this cause everyone to die?"

West shrugged. "It's hard to say, they can, and do affect power. What caused the polarity switch has to be a polar shift. It has to be. That's the only thing I can think of. You know, North is South. South is north. Positive is now negative."

"Can that happen? Wouldn't we have massive disasters?"

"That's what they say. I don't know," West answered. "That's why we need to go to the Fan Mountain observatory. I figured, if we saw this, others did. Anyone with any background in this will hit an observatory. Hell, those at the observatory had to see it coming. If so, they're there with answers, or someone is."

"There are other observatories," Shane said. "If this one doesn't pan out. There is Leander. That's in Charlottesville. We want to hit Fan Mountain first because it is isolated."

"We have to do it fast," West said. "We're running out of time."

I crinkled my brow and then looked up to the sky. "Are we expecting worse?"

"Worse than that?" He pointed. "Yeah."

Slowly I looked at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Come inside." He stepped back into the house.

I cautiously followed, each step I took hurt and I slid down into a chair at the table.

West pushed the map my way. "Remember last night I told you I was working on memory?"

"Yes."

"These red dots I placed, they are nuclear power plants. Virginia is number three in the country when it comes to nuclear power."

"North Anna is near here," I said.

"It is. We are, right now ..." West said. "Within the circle I marked for it, which is a hundred mile radius."

I glanced at the map, there were entire areas filled with circles. "West, what's going on?"

"In the event of power loss, each of these stations," West indicated to them. "Are equipped with diesel generators to pump the water needed to cool the core. Now ... under normal circumstances, power is usually back on pretty fast. But not in this case. They are supposed to be designed so they are protected from surges, and I believe that to be true, because it doesn't take long for a core to melt. Two days perhaps. So we have this system so they're protected. That core is hot, if it stops getting what it needs to cool down, it will evaporate what's there until it finally starts to fully meltdown."

"Can it be stopped?" I asked.

"No." West shook his head. "There is no means to cool the cores on any of these once diesel fuel runs out. And if the generators cease to work because of another storm, then we lose any extra time. Unfortunately, it is not a matter of if it happens, it is a matter of when. It's gonna happen, there's no stopping it."

"When?" I asked. "When will it happen?"

"If it didn't already in some areas, at most another week. At most."

"What happens ..." Shane asked, "when it does meltdown?"

"Depends," West answered. "Does it melt to the point it causes a fire and burns, sending up a plume, or does another big storm hit and the surge causes an explosion? With either of them, everything in a ten-mile radius is gone. Either burned or crushed by enough radioactivity for people to die within hours."

"Outside the ten miles?" I asked.

"Within twenty miles you'll have sickness immediately, death in days. Chances are it's already leaking radiation. Anyone camped near there or living near there is getting radiated. We're not talking one power plant, we're talking all ninety-nine nuclear power plants in thirty states. The amount of radiation produced by all of them leaves very limited areas of the country that could ... could be safe."

"Jesus," I said with a gasp. "Is there anything positive?"

"No," West replied. "There's no worst case scenario, it's all worst case. It doesn't get any better, it just gets worse. Think Chernobyl. Chernobyl to the max. All this ..." his hand smoothed over the circles, "becomes a vast wasteland of uninhabitable land. Contaminated not just for decades, but for thousands of years. Between the geomagnetic storms and the meltdowns, this is hell on earth. If ever there was a moment when modern man is forced back into the dark ages, this is the moment. Right here, right now," he said. "We're living it."

## 21 – SPOILS

I didn't quite understand why everyone up and left town. By my estimate it had to be around thirty people, give or take a few. Where were they going to go? I could understand if they feared or thought about the impending meltdown, but it was evident they didn't. Because they were headed right into it. What in the world would possess them to go? They had everything they needed right here in this town.

Maybe their destination was Charlottesville, Richmond or even farther north to Alexandria.

Shane had suggested that perhaps Roy was wrong. That maybe they weren't in search of power to live, but rather away from power to live. Go somewhere off the grid. But if that was the case would Gridlock be the place for my husband? For all I knew, he may have headed there. After we exhausted a search of the east, Gridlock was my next destination. Unlike Ken, I would leave a note. Not only was my family separated, they were out in the world, and there was no way to find out exactly where they went. It was conceivable I would never see them again. With the impending meltdown not far away distance wise, I had to wonder what in the world would be next. It seemed like we were facing one thing after another.

Toggling between seriousness and joking, I asked West, "What is next? Ice Age? Are we all going to freeze over while we're in the dark ages without any power or light?"

He said, "I wouldn't rule that out."

Seriously? How insane was that?

I had been spoiled by the information and technology world we had built. I relied heavily on it. Have a pain ... look it up. Need a hotel room ... look it up. Anything, anything I needed to know I searched for on the Internet. I needed answers to what was going on, and there were none. Nothing. It was like I had every ounce of knowledge sucked out of me, stolen, never to return. But it really wasn't, eventually we would find a new way, a way to learn things for ourselves, or teach ourselves.

The prospect of the new world we faced was a frightening one. It was one that I would have to learn how to live in. In a sense, I envied my daughter, Molly. She didn't know the world I grew up in, the one I came to be spoiled by. She would know this new world and would thrive in it. While others like me, recoiled from it in some sort of way.

How would we manage to stay warm? To eat? To get well when we're sick, or the big one, to find other people?

West didn't mince his words. "If you want to eat you'll grow your food. If you want a community you will build one. If you want a doctor, you'll find one. If not, then you'll be one."

Adapt and change. Or die.

A long-term plan for survival would be needed, one a little different than anyone ever imagined, one open for anything, because now anything was possible.

I couldn't put my mindset to any particular plan though, because I couldn't think of a future, not until I knew what had become of my family.

## 22 – SCATTERED WRAPPERS AND PAPERS

I should have found a way to sleep standing up, because laying down didn't help my chest and ribs, it made it worse. Not moving for several hours made every turn, every lift of a limb or breath I took to be painful. There was minimal bruising on my chest, the worst pain came from my hand.

Once again, I tried to wiggle my fingers and didn't feel the middle two. While Shane told me they were there, a part of me didn't believe him.

Before leaving, I felt it was time to change the bandage. I needed to look and see what I was dealing with. I didn't know when we'd be back if I'd have a chance to change them on the road. Then only definite plan to return to my home was after we exhausted a search of the east and were headed west to put distance between us and the nuclear plume.

I gathered up the supplies that Shane had picked up at the store for burns. Ointment, special bandages. Slowly, I began the process of unraveling the bandages. They wrapped over my fingers up to my mid forearm, that was where I began to pull them off.

The first spool of bandages ended just above my wrist, there wasn't a mark under them. Then I started to unwrap the next spool. Nothing was on my wrist, lower palm or thumb. As I got to the midway point of my hand, I started noticing some discoloring. Then I got to my fingers and wanted to scream. Not in pain, but in shock. My index finger and pinky were red with peeling skin that exposed seeping flesh, but they were nothing compared to the fingers I couldn't feel. There was a reason for it, they may as well have been gone. They were black, like old pooled blood had gathered under the skin, they were bent slightly. No matter how hard I tried to move them, they wouldn't move. To make matters worse, a horrendous smell came from my hand that I attributed to those two fingers. They were obviously dead.

I couldn't bring myself to touch them, or put ointment on my hand. I fumbled with the fresh bandages, trying to hide them. That was exactly what I was doing, hiding them. Perhaps if I didn't see the fingers, they would miraculously get better. I wrapped my index finger and pinky separately, then the dead ones together bringing the bandages only to mid palm.

"Need help," West asked.

"No, I got it."

"Did you put ointment on them?"

“No.” I shook my head. “Two look like they’re healing, the other two ... no amount of ointment is going to help them.”

“I know.” West slightly lowered his head. “We’re hoping we can find medical help for you.”

“Is that why you didn’t tell me?” I asked.

“What good would it have been?”

“What happens if we don’t find medical help?”

“We have strong drugs, we have a little space at the base of the fingers. We’ll cut them off.”

“You’ll what? You?”

“Me or Shane. If we don’t find help in a few days they have to go before the black spreads any further.”

I understood what he was saying, hell, all I had to do was look at my fingers to know. It could have been worse, I could have been dead.

After I finished, I was ready to go. A fresh battery was placed in the older hearing aid. I sat in the backseat of the old Dodge Dart.

The plan was ... no one would say anything. Not a peep so Shane who had the hearing aid, could hear the static. If he heard it, he’d reach up and pull out the hearing aid. West would shut it off, and at the same time Shane would put the car in park and turn off the ignition. They had five seconds. It was something they spent the evening before rehearsing while riding up and down the street. Practicing so we didn’t lose the ignition, or a life.

Despite knowing the old car theory had been tested, and even seeing it work when they practiced, it was still unnerving. The pain pill worked better than the Xanax and I contemplated taking up heavy drinking.

The Dodge Dart was an interesting ride. The first turn Shane made I slid completely across the back seat, the belts had long since been removed.

Other than the slip and slide ride, I tolerated the first leg of the journey pretty well.

The plan was to go to the observatory first. We would take the secondary road there, head north to Charlottesville, possibly a little farther east, before hitting I-64 to head back toward my home town.

Fan Mountain Observatory was fifteen miles south of Charlottesville, set in a remote area and it took a trip up a steep, winding, piss poor road to get there.

The way West spoke I expected cars to be there and people camping out, but no one was there. The bay window to the observatory was open. I felt pretty good when we got there, until I moved from the back seat and the pain hit me again. I hated, absolutely hated feeling bad. I also didn’t like the fact that there was no way I was going to make it up to the observatory deck.

The temperature was warming up and while Shane and West went up to the observatory I went into the attached white building, the station house, for some shade.

I wasn't sure what they expected to find, neither of them knew what they were looking for or at.

More than anything they were hoping someone was there. It was evident that no one was.

At least at first glance.

I waited in the station house, stared at the pictures on the wall and located a snack counter. I hadn't even realized I had been craving sweets until I saw the candy. I grabbed a chocolate bar, opened it and as I put the wrapper in the garbage, I saw loads of wrappers.

Strange, I thought to myself.

"You are not going to believe what we found," West said

"You too." I held up the candy. "Where's Shane?"

"Still up there. Is it melted, the candy I mean?" West asked.

"Not quite."

Excited, West made room on the snack bar check-out counter and spread out some papers.

"What is this?" I asked. Looking down at the paper with circles, hand drawings and mathematical equations I didn't understand.

"Someone was here. Just as I thought."

"You think they'll be back?"

"She already is," came a deep woman's voice from across the room.

I looked over to see a broad shouldered woman walk into the station house. She wore standard BCU's and a military tee shirt. Her dark blond hair was cropped short and dashed with gray, she wore square glasses. She was a presence. Her voice told me she was older, as did the hardened lines on her face.

She walked over to the counter with authority, reaching out for her papers. "This is my stuff. What are you doing with it?"

"This is amazing," West told her, protecting them and stopping her from grabbing the papers. "We came here hoping someone had figured it all out. Looks like you have."

"It's speculation."

"Aren't you surprised to see people?" I asked. "I mean, we've not seen many."

"Because they won't unplug. How hard is it to get it. Unplug ... live. And I've seen people. There are many camps set up. People think the cities and towns are the problem. Plus, I just got back from taking the man and woman who were staying here to another camp for medical help. Speaking of which." She stared at me. "You are awfully colorless. Is that injury infected?" She nodded at my bandaged hand.



“No, just bad,” I answered. I was shocked and tried to pull somewhat away from her prying eyes.

“Where is there medical help?” West asked. “She needs it.”

“There’s a pretty raw set up outside Charlottesville, then a nice one about a hundred miles southwest of here,” she answered.

“This.” I pointed to her papers. “You did this, right? Can you tell us what is going on and what this means?”

“I can tell you,” she said, reaching for the papers and spreading them out. “Question is ... do you really want to hear it?”

## 23 – A VIEW FROM ABOVE

She introduced herself as Lieutenant Colonel Jane Ladka of the United States Air Force before she grabbed a peanut butter candy bar and placed her charts neatly on the counter. She excused herself for a moment to go up to the observation deck to get a folder. West went with her in case there was trouble, then she, West and Shane all returned.

“God you’re pale,” she said to me, then opened a folder. “You’ll have to excuse my drawings. I wasn’t using the camera on the scope.” She laid a printed image on the counter. “This right here was taken eight months ago. This is the one that got me worried. “Our sun is in a cycle. These areas here ...” She pointed to numerous circles. “Are the beginning of solar flares. Now they’re normal and nothing to worry about, however, this area here,” she pointed. “Looks like a small swirl of clouds ... that’s the beginnings of a Coronal Mass Ejection. Only ...” she switched to another photo. “That didn’t release. This is two months later. Not only is it growing, there are numerous others joining in. Sure, it burped out a few CME’s, nothing major, but it wasn’t letting up. It was building. I was actually concerned that maybe the sun was going nova, or maybe burning through its hydrogen at an astronomical rate. Which you know, would eventually make the core collapse and the sun a red giant, evaporating all earth’s water. That later part won’t happen in our lifetime. Although I’m still not ruling it out. Not with the latest activity.”

“Christ,” Shane gasped out. “How do you know this Colonel? Is this a hobby?”

“Jane, just call me Jane, and no. It was part of my job, I was a scientist for NASA for fourteen years. I was up there twice. In space.”

“Wait. Stop.” West formed a “T” with his hands. “I know you. Colonel J. Merin Ladka. You were let go a little bit ago from NASA for posting an article on their website.”

Jane nodded. “That’s me. They took it down. Said I was causing panic, or could cause panic. It was my prediction about this. I was off by a couple weeks.”

“Were they trying to bury the information?” I asked.

“No conspiracy,” she answered. “They said I was wrong. They said it was no larger than Carrington and would probably miss earth like in 2012.”

Shane asked. “Carrington?”

“In 1859, before we had all this stuff relying on electricity, a geomagnetic storm, the largest ever recorded hit earth. It was fast,

too. CME's typically take three days to reach earth. Carrington took about seventeen hours. It was named Carrington because the scientist that discovered it before it hit was Richard Carrington. So that event was big and fast."

"So how does the ..." West paused dramatically and looked at her. "The Ladka Event compare to that? You discovered it, I'm going to call it that."

"That is so nice of you," I said. "I like it much better just saying an event."

Jane looked at me for a split second as if I were a crackpot. "The ... Ladka ... It makes Carrington look like a snowflake, Dwarfs it in magnitude. I told everyone this. Once they let me go I continued to watch it. After a while I started using the old techniques like Richard Carrington did, because I wanted to be able to predict and watch without the aid of computers."

"So this is everywhere?" West asked.

Jane nodded. "It wasn't at first. For example, India. That was a smaller one, more like a flare, it was the warning shot, I called it. I was on CNN that night, after India. They sort of ridiculed me in a subtle way. But I told them another one was coming in the next twenty-four hours and that I was going off the grid, and others should do the same. The effects of the CME moved across the globe, others had warning, but I don't think they knew to step away from electronics."

"How did you?" Shane question. "I mean, you said you were going off grid, how did you know this would happen?"

"Research," Jane replied. "Actually, I can't take credit. Tesla saw this coming."

"The car people predicted this?" I asked.

"Tesla the man," she said. "Nikole Tesla, born about three years before Carrington. It was an obsession of his. He was a great man of science and electricity. A good analogy would be, if Thomas Edison was Stephen Hawking, then Nikola Tesla was William Sidis."

"Who?" I asked.

"Exactly," she said. "Tesla was a bit of an eccentric."

"And rude," West added. "He was pretty rude, hated overweight people, had nothing nice to say about Edison."

"Don't forget he died a virgin," Jane said.

I shook my head. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing." She shrugged. "Anyhow, my hypothesis was based on his theories that earth hinged on a pole shift and one huge geomagnetic storm could toss it over the line. But north wouldn't just be south, positive would be negative. Like with a thunderstorm, the polarity reverses. Severe outputs at high voltage, the surge in the

system would be deadly for anyone five feet or closer to a live appliance. On or not, if it was plugged in, they would die.”

“What about disasters?” I asked. “I heard that pole shifting causes major natural disasters.”

“That is not true,” Jane said. “Scare tactics. I’d say look it up, but you rely on the internet.”

We were full of questions, each of us firing them off, but there was one important one. If she was indeed an expert, what was her opinion on it all? Was it done? Was it over?

“Not by a long shot,” she said. “The sun is active and a geomagnetic storm usually lasts ten days. All these storms are leading up to another massive CME, this one bigger than the last. And whatever remains working as far as electronics and generators, it will finish off with such a force, ten feet will be too close.”

As soon as she said that, my thoughts went to the nuclear reactors. How West said it had generators that would be protected from events like Carrington and Ladka, but if Jane was correct, and the last CME would be the worst, the cores weren’t just going to melt, chances were, it was going to blow.

I prayed my family wasn’t anywhere near.

## 24 – ROLLING

Jane knew the area, she traveled it a lot often making her way to the other observatory in Charlottesville. When we told her of our plight, she decided to go with us. She knew of several camps on the way, and even some on I-64, where I hoped I'd find my family.

She suggested that we first visit the camp ten miles north, they had a doctor there.

I thought West was impressive with his knowledge, but Jane trumped him, she seemed to be one step ahead of everything. I felt like a little kid being allowed to hang out with a super cool teenager.

West grew defensive.

We shared with her our concerns about the North Anna Nuclear power plant.

"I thought of that already," she said.

West didn't believe her. "Really. You thought of that?"

"I did. In fact, I think it probably already started to leak."

West shook his head. "They are built to protect against such events as these."

"You never know. I'm monitoring me, though." She reached in her pocket and pulled out a credit card size orange card. "Personal dosimeter. It reads safe now. Do you have one? I'll get you one, I have an extra in my case." She crinkled her brow and stepped away, stating she needed to get some items for the trip.

West grumbled at her, then looked at me. "What?"

"Nothing. Nothing." I held up my hands in defense.

He stormed away.

"Wow, that was fast. One second they get along, the next, they don't." I said to Shane.

"Intelligent people are competitive," Shane replied. "You heard that story they talked about with Edison and Tesla. They can theorize all they want. But when it's all said and done." Shane winked. "We're gonna need plumbing. I'll be the cool person then."

I laughed for a moment, then it hit me. What would my role be? What could I possibly bring to the table, especially since it was inevitable I'd be without a hand? I had no useful skills, heck, I went to a premade prepper camp for wannabe preppers.

Ken had skills, he could build things.

Michael was a good laborer, a hard worker, that was when he had a job and was sober.

My son.

I know what West and Shane believed, but a part of me kept going

back to the pessimistic attitude that something was wrong with my son.

When it was time to roll Jane had packed a briefcase with her items and refused to get into the Dodge Dart. She had her own means of transportation.

"We have a warning system," West told her, showing her the hearing aid.

"I do, too." She held up a meter. "Just like you pop the hearing aid from your ear, I pop out the battery. "I'm good. I don't need it on my journey though."

Which was true. She had a horse drawn cart she had gotten from the Amish when she was making her way north from her home in Raleigh, North Carolina.

I was hopeful when she told me that. After all, to the best of my knowledge the Amish didn't use electricity.

Jane clarified that for the most part they did not, but their stores they maintained on the outskirts of the communities did, and she found herself having to explain to them what occurred.

I opted to ride with Jane.

"You're injured," West said to me. "That cart can not be more comfortable than the car."

"Have you ever ridden in the back seat of a Dodge Dart?" I asked.

"No."

"Then you can't make that statement. I'll be fine. We'll be behind you."

In truth, that Amish buggy was more comfortable than the Dodge. We followed behind them at a good pace and even though they ended up out of our sight, I was happy with my travel choice.

We'd meet up at the first camp, that was the plan. It was one road, one way. No way to lose them.

I didn't want to make West feel badly, him and Shane were good to me and saved my life. But I really wanted to talk to Jane. I just wanted some female company. I thought I made the right choice and that her and I related on some level. Then when I asked why she was headed north in the first place I knew.

"I knew it was dangerous territory," she told me. "I started like you guys. With an old car. I knew the risks. But I had to find my son. He lived in Lynchburg. A hotel manager there. A little older than you. Not much. I got the buggy right before that when I couldn't make it across the highway."

"And did you? Did you find him?"

Jane stared outward as she drove. "Yes. I found him. He didn't make it."

"I'm sorry."

“Me too. A mother isn’t supposed to outlive her child. She isn’t.”

I lowered my head.

“I told him the night before, please, no electronics for a few days. I called him right after India, after I was on the news.”

“Why didn’t he listen?”

“Oh, he did. I went to his house, everything was off. Unfortunately, he went to work in the morning. You can’t go without power in a hotel. He was doing his job. But he listened. Sons they may act like they don’t, but they do. They listen.”

“My son doesn’t. At times he hates me, or says he does. People ... people say it’s the stuff he’s putting in his body, the alcohol, it’s that talking. But I still hear my son.”

“And he hears you.” Jane reached over and placed her hand on mine. “We’ll find your family. They survived the ... Ladka, they’re alive.”

“They went east. That’s all I have.”

“They’re together with people, they know the risks, they’re in a camp, they’re fine.”

She talked about the camps she had seen in her search for others that could help her confirm her findings and fears. The camps were more like refugee hubs, people sharing food and knowledge. Some set up in parking lots of big stores, with one of two people watching over resources. Most camps she had run into had been set up quickly. Away from the power grids of the cities.

We were close to one that was ahead at the intersection of the road we were on and I-64.

My heart stopped the second we rounded a bend and I saw the Dodge Dart stopped in the middle of the road. It faced backwards as if it had spun.

“No,” I whispered out. “No.”

Jane brought the buggy to a stop. “That’s an old car. The ignition could go, that wouldn’t create a death sentence.” She got down from the buggy.

It took me a little longer. Every move hurt and I tried to put on a pretense of strength, I didn’t want her to think I was weak. Aside from the pain in my hand and chest, my heart hurt thinking about Shane and West.

Then my heart felt like it stopped again when I saw Shane and West emerge from the car. I exhaled so hard it sent my body forward, and I grabbed for my knees.

“What’s going on?” Jane shouted.

They walked toward us.

“You okay?” Shane asked, reached out to me.

I nodded.

“We wanted to get to you first,” West said.

“What for?” Jane asked.

“We found that camp you were talking about. We estimate around thirty people. A few kids,” West said. “We turned around and came back here to wait for you.”

I smiled. “That’s about how many left my town.” The smile on my face quickly fell when I noticed West looking so serious. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re gonna have to come and see if you recognize anyone. It’ll be hard, I know, but at least we can rule it out.”

“What ... what are you talking about?” I asked. “What do you mean recognize them?”

“As I said, we found the camp.” West shifted his eyes from Shane to Jane, then again to me. “They’re all dead.”



## 25 – ARROWHEAD

It was my cross to bear, my burden to carry. I don't even think Shane or West could have completed the task.

When I arrived at my home, I couldn't bring myself to walk through that door ... they did.

When I needed to search for Michael, I was injured. So ... they did.

The campsite, just a few miles north of a place called Arrowhead, was my call and my obligation. My eyes were needed. I had to go into the camp and see if it was the people from my town, if my family was there.

Before the discovery of the dead camp, we had stopped at a place called Pippin Vineyards, the beauty of it was breathtaking with vast green lands, picturesque buildings and flowing streams. I kept the beauty of that place in my mind as we headed toward the ugliness that I knew lay ahead.

The camp was located in a clearing. It wasn't far from a church, and looked more like a retreat area. The small rectangular cabin structures reminded me of Michael's camp days in the Boy Scouts.

It looked like tents had been set up around the fire pit.

I didn't need to be a scientist or genius to know what happened to the camp. I could smell it before I even saw it.

A burnt smell filled the air and mixed with it was the smell of the bodies rotting in the Virginia heat. Bodies that weren't burned beyond recognition.

The bodies were everywhere. Some looked as if they ran while on fire, landing not far from the buildings, the clothes burned from them while a huge charred area encircled the remains.

It was a horrible way to go. Their mouths were still open, as if they died mid-gasp, mid-scream for help.

Where did I even begin?

Nearly every person looked the same, a blackened, hairless body, touting a pain filled final expression.

I began my search and task to look at every person.

"What would have done this?" I heard Shane ask.

"Another surge," West replied. "They were using generators."

"When Carrington hit," Jane said. "Telegraph operators were shocked and combustibles ignited from the sparks. I'm guessing this is what happened here."

At first, I wondered if it really mattered 'how' it happened, then I realized it did. With every deadly mistake others made I would be

educated on what to avoid.

I wept. Making my way around camp, I looked at each body, studying what I could of the face trying to find some familiarity. The bodies of the young destroyed me. Those poor babies.

It took me over an hour, but no one looked familiar. I even went through belongings trying to find something that confirmed or ruled out my hometown. I didn't.

The horrible aching reality was, even though I looked at everybody, even though I believed I didn't see my family, I wouldn't know. Not for certain.

For most of the victims, their identity and what they really looked like was singed away by the flames of a fire.

It was emotionally exhausting and physically taxing for me. I was tired and irritated. I wanted answers now and just wasn't getting them.

I shook my head after checking the last body and started walking back to the road.

"Hey, hey," Shane caught up to me. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, sorry."

"Maybe I should get the car," he suggested. "You aren't well."

"I'm fine."

"No, Audrey, you are ..."

"I'm fine." I snapped, then took a second to calm down. "I'm sorry, that was wrong."

"No, it's fine."

"It's not."

West and Jane caught up to us.

"You doing alright?" West reached out.

I shifted my eyes to Shane, then West. "Yeah, I am."

"It's only one of many camps," Jane said. "When we go to the camps you need to ask. Ask around. You'll be surprised what people know. It's early. Everyone is still frazzled. They aren't thinking clearly."

"Obviously. I keep saying it, rehashing it, but I don't understand why everyone just left their homes," I said. "Stay put. I know you said stay away from the grid, but if there is no power, what danger is there?"

Jane explained. "Land lines don't need power. They don't. Yet, if you are on a landline during a thunderstorm it is conceivable you can get electrocuted. Lightning strikes the ground, the lines are a conductor. The same goes at home. Who is to say that a single appliance plugged in won't cause a fire when a surge from the CME blasts through. No one knows for certain what it can do. These people here played it safe, but were dumb at the same time."

“We push forward,” said West. “The colonel here wants to head to Leander Observatory at the University. I think it would be a great stopping point for the day. There’s at least one other camp on the way there.”

I nodded my agreement as I continued to walk.

“You know,” Jane said. “Something else to think of. This man, your neighbor, he never specifically mentioned your family.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Maybe they didn’t go east. Now ...” she held up her hand. “I’m not saying this because one camp was a bust, I’m saying this because you don’t know for sure. I *do* know for sure that there is a huge medical camp run by the Army Reserves on their base and it’s at the regional airport. They may not be fully aware of the ‘why’ things happened, but they are operating as if it’s two hundred years ago. Another ten miles west is a base camp at the National Guard.”

“Okay. Why are you saying this?”

“I’m saying this because you don’t know if they went east for sure. One of them could be injured, they could have gone searching for you. And honestly,” Jane said. “You’re sick and you’re hurt, judging by the smell of that hand it’s not pretty. You can’t search if you’re dead. Maybe consider turning back and heading to the medical camp.”

“As if my family would miraculously be there.” I chuckled in disbelief. “Thank you for telling me I smell.”

“You don’t know,” Jane argued. “They could be there. It’s a big camp.”

“How would they know about it? I can pretty much say with certainty that unless my husband or daughter was hurt they went with the masses. I may not have asked Roy about my family, but I am certain if one of them was hurt or sick he would have told me. If you don’t want to come ...”

“I never said I was coming.” Jane folded her arms. “I’m going to the other observatory and told you I’d take you to some of the camps. After the observatory my ass is going west. Not ...” She nodded her head at West. “Him. But west. West Virginia. Kentucky. Maybe stay and help at the med camp. I don’t know. But I’m not staying in the hot zone. I’m only offering my advice.”

“What would you do if it was your family?” I asked.

“Like you, I’d search until I couldn’t. Until circumstances say not to. But that would be based on the fact that I was healthy. You are not. You need to think of you, and in the interim come up with a contingency. Leave a note somewhere. Send these two men out. You look like hell. I’m just being honest.”

We had arrived at the buggy. She walked over to her side and climbed up.

“Here,” Shane said. “Let me help you up.”

I closed my eyes briefly in disgust at myself. Yes, I needed help into the buggy. But I was tired of it, tired of getting help and needing help.

If I was to move forward and search for my family, one way or another I was going to have to stop needing help.

## 26 – WRAPPED AND WARNED

It was a silent ride and not because I was angry with Jane. I wasn't. She was honest with me and I had to respect that. I didn't respect that she told me I smelled. However, the simple fact that she could smell my wound made me fearful of how bad it was. There was nothing I could do about it. Not yet. Maybe once I exhausted my search or went as far as I could I would seek medical help.

Just before we arrived on campus we found another camp. This one was at the edge of the university property, and unlike the previous one we had found they didn't have generators.

We pulled up to the camp and Jane let us know she was going ahead to the observatory. She suggested we meet her there to camp for the night.

We agreed, but I wanted to follow her suggestion of asking around the camp about my family and people from my town. That was of course, if they weren't there.

The camp wasn't organized, there was no rhyme or reason to how they were set up. Just people gathering and surviving. There was a lot of conversation about what would be next, how they would proceed. It wasn't hard to see each and every person.

I didn't recognize a single face. My husband and daughter weren't there, and neither was the mayor, a face I was sure to recognize.

The camp may have been a bust as far as finding my family, but it wasn't when it came to information.

One man there who kept the huge fire pit going was extremely helpful. He told us it was more of a transient camp for travelers going both ways.

"A lot of people pass through," Fire Man told me. "West and east. Going west to look for family, east to look for help."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Supposedly further east, Washington, Frederickson, they shut down their grids before this thing hit. They're organizing and keeping things calm until it's safe to turn everything back on. It's supposed to be a survivor hub. Go there and find people."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Word of mouth. People traveling west to find family. They told us. And we just spread the word."

I told him how I was searching for my family, how they came from a small town, and he said he remembered a group of about twenty traveling in old cars. They stayed one night and moved on. Destination, he believed, was Fredericksburg.

Fire Man didn't recognize my family when I showed him the picture. Then again he only spoke to the man who seemed to be leading the group. A man whose description matched that of the mayor.

It all still didn't make sense to me, and I conveyed that to Shane.

"In what way?" he asked.

"Why would my family keep going east? If they knew where I was and knew I was off grid, knew chances were good that I was alive, why keep going east?"

"Focal point and survival," Shane said. "You have a baby. Your husband's number one responsibility is to keep your child alive and well. If you were my wife I would find a place to stop, simply because I would be fearful that we'd be running in circles missing each other. What better place to stop than an established hub? A place where word of mouth is claiming everyone should go. I'd wager on that."

Shane's explanation made sense. Knowing that I was looking for my family and hearing of a survivor hub made me want to go there.

I wasn't banking that Fire Man saw my townspeople, I wasn't going to get too optimistic, but it was a lead and I'd follow it, until, like my search, I couldn't go anymore.

Shane brought the map with him and made a notation for the camp. He said he was going to mark every place we stopped. After the camp he suggested we head to the observatory to rest for the night, adding that I didn't look good.

That infuriated me. Not that he spoke untruths, but more that I felt as bad as he said I looked, and I didn't want to feel that way anymore.

Being the sick person made me a dead weight they had to carry.

Even though it hadn't been that long I was tired of feeling physically weak.

On the way to the observatory on campus I saw a chain drug store, and I thought of my grandmother. My mind flashed back to when I was a child and my mother took a tumble down the stairs cracking a rib. My grandmother insisted if she bound the rib, wrapped it firm, my mother would be able to function better.

My mother of course argued that it was not recommended and wrapping them could cause pneumonia.

My grandmother in her sassy way just told her, "Wrap the ribs and breathe."

It was my only recourse, I had to try something to get relief.

The drug store was heavily picked over, except the section I needed. I knew it wouldn't be. I grabbed a few Ace bandages, and right there in the aisle I whipped off my shirt wrapping my chest from breast to the bottom of my rib cage, firm and snug. The pain pills that

West found took the edge off, but made me feel foggy. I opted for ibuprofen and downed four of them.

I didn't know if it was mental or physical, but I felt better after wrapping my chest. Putting my shirt on was easier.

My hand only ached in the palm, it was strange. I grabbed bandages for that and headed out of the store. Just outside the doorway, I stopped. Right by the entrance was a bound stack of newspapers. Probably delivered the night before everything went down. The last paper printed, at least for a long time.

The front page caught my eye and I crouched down to the stack. It was twined tight with a plastic strip, and I had to roll it off the edge to slip one out.

The headline read 'Two Hundred Dead in Dubai High Rise' worse than that the sub header was foreboding, 'Should we all unplug?'

It was right there. The warning was out, even if it came across sensationalized, there was knowledge of something happening. No one listened. Not even Charlie listened. He glued himself to the computer watching. Everyone probably believed it would happen elsewhere. Not to them. Not all over.

But it did.

I took the paper with me and headed toward the others.

## 27 – DEWEY

Shane didn't mean anything by it other than as a friendly gesture. It was late afternoon and we were setting up our camp in the observatory building on campus. Shane brought over a sandwich he made using canned chicken.

"Thought you might be hungry." He handed me the plate. "Eat that. Until we learn how to bake bread in a hearth, it's gonna be a while until we have bread again."

I accepted it and ate it, but when I was just about finished, I got angry at myself. Why did I need him to not only cook for me, but also hand me the plate. Did they view me as the most pathetic person alive?

I felt it.

That sandwich wasn't the only meal they prepared for me. In fact, I hadn't cooked food for myself since I was at Gridlock. Lord knows I didn't prepare anything when I sat on my front lawn staring at my house, scared to death to go in.

When West gave a big speech about how no one should travel alone, did he realize the weight he'd carry because of me when he said that?

I was a proverbial ball and chain. Not only were they dragged into my plight, I slowed them down in the process.

Two strangers. They had to save my life when I stupidly grabbed on to metal knowing the shock was coming. Save my life, fix me, help me, dress me. That was after I was electrocuted. Before that, they couldn't even ride their bikes at a good pace, because I was worthless at peddling. My God, they had to go into my house and check for my family. They went out and searched the entire town for my son.

If I put that on two men I barely know, I could only imagine what I did to those closest to me.

Was that why I didn't have any friends? And I didn't. None. Not true friends. None that would drop what they were doing for me. Then again, maybe they did one too many times and I didn't notice. Anyone that I called a friend, really wasn't. The only texts I ever got were from my husband or son. I met no one for coffee or lunch, no girl's nights out.

My entire life had been about my family, and I made them do everything. It was never me.

I was barely out of high school when Michael was born. I moved in with my parents. They watched him while I worked and went to school. They bought his diapers, formula, food and clothes, until I met



Ken.

Then he took over all that.

When my parents passed away in the accident, Ken made the arrangements. When I couldn't find Michael, many times ... Ken went out and looked.

The closest I ever came to doing something alone was going to Gridlock. No wonder Ken was so worried.

Never had I done anything on my own without relying on others. There I was, everyone I loved and cared for was out there in a godforsaken world, and I couldn't even take on the task of finding them myself.

I decided that would end.

I couldn't allow Shane and West to continue the search, not when things were getting dangerous. We were in the area that would be affected by the meltdown. It wasn't fair to have them dive into that.

It was my fight, not theirs.

If I were going to lead my own battle, I had to prepare.

Jane's words to me earlier stuck with me. We were talking about disasters following a pole shift and she said, *'I'd say look it up, but you rely on the internet'*

She didn't say it to insult me, she was honest. I was as lazy as everyone else. I probably wouldn't have unplugged either had I not been at Gridlock.

Lucky for me, I was at a great place, a college campus. I grabbed the lantern and slipped out without saying anything. My destination was the campus library.

The red building with white pillars was easy to find, signs gave directions, and it was only a couple blocks away.

The historical building was cold inside, and the only source of brightness was whatever sunlight poked through the windows. Where the books were, there weren't that many windows. It was massive, signs pointed to different sections, but I hadn't a clue where to begin.

It hit me when I stood there, when was the last time I stepped into a library? It was vast, the shelves high and narrow. Standing in the center of one room was when I saw it. It caused my heart to thump in my chest.

The long and tall cherry oak cabinets with small drawers.

"No, no, no," I whined aloud.

It was like stepping back in time to my high school days. I hated it then, I used to pretend to know what I was looking at. I wished I would had paid more attention to the card catalog.

I opened a drawer and flipped through the cards, then another and another. I growled loudly, slamming one of the drawers. "Who uses the fucking Dewey Decimal System? Who? Who even knows it?"

Oh my God.”

My head lifted when I heard footsteps.

It was probably West, swooping in. He'd probably ridicule me about looking for a book.

When he emerged from the shadow into the light of my lantern, I saw it wasn't West.

The young man was probably the same age as Michael. His bushy dark brown hair was parted on the side and needed a cut. He wore glasses, and was thin. He walked cautiously toward me, lifting one hand in a wave.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello.”

“Do you need help?”

For some reason, the moment that innocent young man asked me that, I lost it and flipped.

“No!” I shouted, my voiced bouncing off walls. “I may not look it, but I am not sick!” I slammed one of the drawers. “I don't need medicine, I don't need treated, a bandage, cooked for or saved. Okay? Okay? Okay?” Another drawer slammed.

“Okay,” he said, calmly. “That wasn't what I meant. I mean, if you did need like medicine or food, I'd get it. I meant ...” he reached over and opened a drawer. “This.”

Embarrassed and defeated, I exhaled and dropped my head down to the open drawer in the third column, second row of the card catalog cabinet.

## 28 – COUNTDOWN

It was a huge, leather bound book almost too heavy for me to lift and it contained the most beautiful maps. I found the map of this area and it was perfectly detailed. Using another book, I marked where the nuclear plants were, along with the camps we had found, the route we had taken. Troy knew that library well. For a young person who probably lived off his gadgets he was adept in the Dewey Decimal system. He barely needed it to find the books I wanted.

I lifted my eyes slightly when Troy dropped another book on the table.

“This should do it. This is all about radiation.”

“Thank you. Did you find the book on that Telsa guy?”

“Tesla,” he corrected. “No. Not yet.”

Carefully, I ripped the map page from the book.

“I will go ... whoa, hey, wait. You can’t rip out that map.”

“I need it. And really, what good are they going to do here now?” I asked.

“Um ... civilization will rise again and these will be more than needed.”

“Yeah, well in a couple days they’ll be contaminated and this whole area off limits for a thousand years.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He scratched his head. “I forgot about that.”

“You thought about that?”

“Sure.” He said down. “It’s gonna be soon, and it’s going to be big.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The big CME that’s coming, it’s going to be like a lightning bolt. I am going to be far away from anything remotely electronic, metal, you name it. I’m just not taking a chance. Those generators at North Anan pumping water into the core are protected. They won’t be from this CME, and I really think we’ll see an explosion. Not like, a mushroom cloud, but it will go.”

“Can I ask why you’re here? Not in the library, but on campus. Did you lose your family?”

“No, I know where they are. Both my parents are doctors, they are working at different camps. Speaking of which ... maybe you should find my mom for that hand.”

“You didn’t even see it.”

“I can ... uh smell it.”

I winced. “I’m sorry.”

He held up his hand in a no worries manner. “No. I promised my

parents I'd meet up. I wanted to watch the big CME, try to pinpoint when it fires off. Also mark down every little one that happens as well."

"Are you studying to be a doctor?"

"No. I'm an astronomer, earth science, that sort of stuff."

"Is that how you all knew how to survive?" I asked.

He nodded. "I knew it was coming. After India, we unplugged. I figured we'd get hit between five and eight a.m. We shut down everything in the house. We woke up ... We thought maybe we had overreacted until ... until we started hearing the car crashes and planes dropping. So ... you are looking for your family?"

"I am."

"How do you know where to look? Were they visiting people?"

"No, a neighbor said everyone went east. I am going to look for as long as I can," I said. "Wouldn't you?"

"No." He shook his head. "If I knew my parents were out there and didn't know where, I'd perch my butt down somewhere that I knew they'd look, because if we're all out searching we're going in circles."

"That's a good point."

"Maybe if you went to a hospital camp to take care of that hand and whatever else is wrong with you, maybe they'll look for you there. If I was out looking the hospital camps would be the first places I'd check."

"I can't do that. I have to search," I said with frustration. "I don't even know if they're together. I have so much ground to cover. I just wish I could just drive there."

"Why not? I drive everywhere."

"Then you're lucky," I said. "One of those small pulses will fry you. I saw it happen."

"Not lucky, I'm smart." Troy said. "I have been logging the little ones. I know when they shot from the sun, I know how long they take to get here and I know when not to drive."

"Wow." I sat back. "Still, there's no way to be certain and that scares me because there's no way not to get electrocuted."

"Sure there is. Wear a Faraday suit."

"Wait. What did you say?"

"A Faraday suit," he explained. "It's a metal suit that works as an inductor, so no electric ever gets in ..."

"I know what one is." I stood up and smacked my head. "Oh my God. I can't believe I didn't think of that. I knew this. My father was a lineman."

"Then you know about the suit, the hood ..."

"Gloves and boots, yes."

“I can give you the times I believe the pulses are coming,” he said. “If by chance the car blows. Find another.”

The loud, “There you are!” shouted by West caught both of our attention.

Troy and I turned to see West, Shane and Jane walking our way.

“Wow,” Troy said. “I didn’t know you weren’t alone.”

“Audrey,” West stormed my way. “What the hell, we were worried. You just left. You disappeared.”

“I’m sorry, I wanted to come here to learn some things,” I said.

“Why?”

“Ah, dude, no,” Troy said. “Don’t be like that. She is trying to gain knowledge. Knowledge is power.”

“Who are you?” Shane asked.

I held out my hand. “This is my new friend, Troy. He’s really smart. He helped me out and knows the Dewey Decimal System.”

“Who doesn’t know the Dewey Decimal System?” Shane asked.

“Me.”

“She just needed assistance. Not help,” Troy said. “So I just ... hey. Hey.” He turned and snapped his finger at Jane who was looking at something. “Army lady. No, that’s my stuff.”

Jane stared down at an open thick folder. It was one of several on the table. She lifted it and brought it over. “Young man, this is impressive.” She set down the folder. “These images of the sun are outstanding. Are the dates and times correct?”

“Yeah,” Troy replied. “I take them every two hours, sometimes more, sometimes less.”

“How? How are you getting the images?”

“The refractor and I print the images from the computer, after I mark them,” Troy answered.

“But that takes electricity,” said Jane.

“I use a generator.”

West laughed. “I thought you said he was smart.”

“Dude, don’t judge me, I am.”

“I am not a dude,” West told him.

“Okay ... Sir. I am smart. I know when the pulses are coming. I chart every one and know when they released. They travel about one point three million miles an hour and take about seventy-one hours to get here. I shut down. I’m still alive. I’m doing something ... smart, right?”

“How many have there been?” Shane asked.

“Since India? Not including the large one that wiped out most of the population ... twenty-five the first day. After that, they were releasing every four hours. Today though, only one. I think the massive building CME ate them.”

Jane lifted an image., “So you do know about this. I see you have it marked.”

“It scares me,” Troy replied. “This one is going to jolt everything, like a defibrillator jump starting a heart. All those underground wires, people running generators, I think we’re looking at massive amounts of flashovers.”

“What’s a flashover?” Shane asked.

As if on automatic, I replied. “Sometimes it’s called an arc flash. It’s when the air is the conductor, and basically it’s an air to ground electrical explosion.”

West tightened his lips and nodded his head at me. “Wow, good short explanation.”

“Is everything going to explode?” Shane asked with a hint of panic.

West shook his head. “No, it’s a flash fire of intense heat. The radius is small. I think saying ‘all over’ is an overstatement by this young man. It’s possible to happen for things running, like a generator.”

“Well, all it takes is one generator,” Troy said smug. “At the wrong place, at the wrong time.”

Jane looked at him. “North Anna.”

West waved out his hand. “I’m one for being cautious about North Anna, but we don’t know if the emergency system is still running.”

“It is,” Troy said. “At least it was yesterday.”

Jane shook her head. “Do not tell me you went out there?”

“No, I’m not that crazy,” Troy said. “Yesterday some dude ... I mean man was at the camp. He was telling people they had to clear out. He came from that area. He said the backup was running, but it wouldn’t for long.”

“Okay,” West said. “That means the smaller pulses aren’t touching those generators. That gives us a few more days until the generators run out and then a couple more days until the meltdown.”

“That is of course,” Jane added. “If the generators survive the big CME, which they won’t. If the CME hits while the generator is running, that core is hot and ...”

Troy interrupted with a dramatic explosion sound.

We all looked at him.

“Sorry,” he said. “I couldn’t resist.”

“He’s right,” West said. “Even with the silly sound effects, the explosion is going to be big. Incineration within a twenty-mile radius, deadly radiation within hours right here. The question is ...” he looked at Troy. “When is it coming?”

I studied those books by the light of my lantern, while sitting on the floor of the observatory museum. Everyone tried to rest, but I didn't.

No one was really asleep. It was quiet, for a while I heard the hum of the generator. Then Troy turned it off. I needed to gather all the knowledge, and as many supplies as I could. I would leave at first light, and I would leave alone. I wasn't sure how West or Shane would take it, and I actually contemplated not telling them, but that wouldn't be fair. Not after all they had done for me.

Troy and I spoke, he thought I was nuts but understood. He knew where to find the Faraday suits and equipment. They'd be heavy, but I'd only wear them in the car. After he helped me with that, it would be the last I would rely on anyone.

I had plotted my course. I would take I-64 another forty miles east near North Anna. If no luck, then I'd turn back. There was still that stretch of interstate between Waynesboro and Charlottesville that hadn't been searched because we went to Fan Mountain. I needed to get the farthest point out of the way first.

On my return trip, I planned to leave my mark in the form of a message sprayed with red paint on road signs and billboards. A message to my family.

*'Audrey Fields – Alive. Is Home'*

Even though 'home' was on the edge of the circumference of danger, I'd leave word there as to where my final destination was.

"Hey," Shane said softly.

"Hey." I looked up.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"Mind if I sit?"

"At your own risk," I said. "I've been told my hand doesn't smell all that great."

"I'm a plumber. I've smelled worse. But that's why I'm here." He had a little case and he showed me as he sat down. "You haven't changed that bandage."

"I don't want to look at it. I know it's bad. I figured ... if I keep it covered, I won't have to see it until they chop it off at some medical camp."

"Give me the hand, Audrey. You don't have to look."

After hesitation, I extended my hand and turned my back. I could feel him undoing the bandages.

"You're working hard, I see," Shane said.

“Trying to be informed.” I crinkled my nose when I smelled the sour odor of my exposed hand.

Shane didn’t waver as he spoke, nor did he give any indication of the state of my hand. “Being informed is good. Let me know if I hurt you.”

“You’re not.”

“Hopefully, you’ll share your knowledge if you find anything out.”

“Absolutely.” After the cool feeling of ointment, I felt the pressure as he placed on the bandages. There really wasn’t any pain at all in my fingers, just an occasional stabbing pain in the palm of my hand.

“All done.”

“Thank you. How long ... how long does the hand have?”

“I’m not a doctor, I won’t even guess. It’ll smell better with the fresh bandages.” Shane stood up. “I know it’s ...” He paused at the sound of running footsteps then turned when Troy raced in the room.

“Guys,” Troy said out of breath. “We have problems.”

At that point West and Jane both sat up then stood. With assistance from Shane I made it to my feet.

“The big one?” Jane asked.

He handed her the paper. “I checked and double checked. It let loose about two hours ago.”

“We have three days,” West said, then turned to me. “We have three days to look and clear the area.”

“No,” Troy said. “This one is moving fast. Not Carrington fast, but fast. All the ones that left before it, it’s shooting through them, knocking them out.”

“How fast?” asked West.

“Fast.” Troy looked at me. “I’m sorry. I know you have your search. But as of right now ... you have thirty-six hours.”

Thirty-six hours, that was it. That was all I had to make my way as far east as I could. After that, it was game over. With a major portion of the nuclear power plants focused on the east coast, a good portion of the United States was about to become a vast wasteland. One that I would never be able to search after thirty-six hours.

If I didn’t find them or know of their whereabouts by then, I stood a chance of never knowing what happened to my family.



## 29 – SPLITTING

“What? Are you insane?” West asked, he was angry at me and made no bones about it. “No. Absolutely not. You are not going out there alone.”

“I need to do this,” I argued.

“I understand. I do. I get it. You don’t want to depend or rely on anyone.”

“Yes.”

“It’s more than that, Audrey. Pairing up is strategically the smart thing to do. You think you’ll just drive right through? You don’t think there’ll be highways blocked? Yeah, it’s only fifty miles, but it might as well be a thousand right now.”

Shane stepped closer. “I hate the thought of her going out there alone, but if this is what she wants we have to give that to her.”

“Thank you,” I said to Shane.

“No, really, it’s not,” West said. “We go.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I can’t ask you to do this.”

“You’re not,” he said.

“You can’t stop me from going alone.”

“You’re right. You are absolutely right,” West said. “Just like you can’t stop me from following you.”

“It’s dangerous. We could get caught in the meltdown. You could die.”

“Then I die. That means I see my son sooner.” He nodded at me. “Audrey, you are searching for something, doesn’t matter how hard it is, your family is out there. You have a goal. Do you have any idea what it’s like to go in circles searching for nothing? Having no focus, no goal, other than to keep moving? This ... this is the first focus I have had since my son died. Don’t take that from me.”

I released a long, post thinking breath. “Fine. But you both can’t go.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Shane lifted his hands. “Just say bye and never see you two again. I told you before no one was out there looking for me.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I want you to go to Lynchburg with the Colonel. Stop at Waynesboro and put a note in my house, just in case Michael goes back there, or Ken. Something that adds to the note I already left. Let them know I will head to Lynchburg. Because we will. I have to go somewhere to get this hand chopped off.”

“That’s not funny,” said Shane. “Nor is it true.” He paused. “You’ll only lose the fingers.”

“Then you’ll do it?” I asked.

“Yes.” Shane nodded. “But if you don’t show up in Lynchburg in seventy-two hours, radiation or not, I come looking for you.”

“You won’t have to,” West replied. “With Troy’s system mapped out, we’ll be near Richmond by the end of today, then in Fredericksburg, then out of there before the big one hits.”

“And remember” Troy said. “When it’s time for the big one, you’ll know by the sky. Get at least fifteen feet away from the car. Nothing may happen, but don’t take chances.”

We listened to his advice and then we made preparations to go.

Jane wasn’t giving up her horse and buggy system, so it would take the three of them most of the day to get to Waynesboro. At that point Shane and Troy felt confident in taking my car to Lynchburg.

To be safe, before leaving, we hit the utility company and found the Faraday suits, hoods, boots and gloves.

They were heavy, almost too heavy for me to wear. If I wasn’t in enough pain, it was excruciating when I tried one on. The weight was too much to bear. Troy once again, assured me his system would work. We’d be safe.

Jane was so no nonsense and didn’t mince words. I thanked her and told her I looked forward to seeing her in Lynchburg. She responded by telling me not to dally or take chances, bringing up that I looked even paler and I could always resume my search when I was well.

Granted I was in pain and felt a little unwell, but I was nowhere near what everyone implied I was.

West and I found a car and were ready to go.

Troy gave us the means that I believed would keep us safe and alive. It didn’t help the nervousness as we drove. I kept telling myself that if it did happen, I probably wouldn’t feel it.

He gave us the schedule of surges that would arrive over the course of three days. They were approximate times. We synchronized our times so make sure we were all on the same page. He didn’t think we’d need to worry after the big CME, but we weren’t taking chances. With the list, he gave us a windup alarm clock and a bag full of dollar store, single battery, small flashlights.

“Set the alarm according to the schedule,” Troy explained. “You’ll have to reset it after the surge. Remember to give it an hour before the impact time. You’ll need that leeway. Once you are out of the car, or wherever you are, light the flashlight and set it down. If the battery hasn’t died when the surge hits, the flashlight will flip around a bit and go out. That is your sign it’s over. And finally, the best warning

method ... put the radio on.”

“The radio?” I asked. “Why?”

“The antenna on the car works like the hearing aid. Turn up the volume. It will continuously scan until it picks up the static in the air. Trust me you’ll hear it. Stop the car, shut it off. You have five seconds, but do it in three.”

He was so smart, and I was happy to have met him. I hoped that Jane would work with him, together, they were a vital part of our future, I believed it.

We packed up and said our goodbyes, with full intention on meeting up. Parting ways wasn’t easy, it was frightening. But it was the best thing to do. I believed it.

“Can I ask you two something,” West said, looking at Troy and Jane before we left. “After the big one, is it over?”

Jane answered first, “Troy believes that the big one is grabbing the little ones on the way. Like a massive tidal wave gathering up force. Theoretically, all the ones on that list that are supposed to come after the big one, we think they won’t.”

“But is it over?” West asked. “Will things go back to normal?”

“The sun may take a break, but I don’t think it’s done,” Troy sadly shook his head. “To answer your question ... no. Things will never go back to the way they were. If we want to survive as a species beyond this ... it can never go back to normal again.”

## 30 – DISHEARTENED

We bore witness.

It wasn't supposed to happen, in a way though, I expected it upon first setting foot at the roadside camp.

A Ladka mini surge, as West insisted on calling them, was due to arrive at eleven in the morning. Merely two hours after we got on the road. I honestly expected to be in Richmond by then. After all, it wasn't the longest drive. Then just a few miles into the trip the road was blocked with a pile up. We stopped to look, the accident had been there since the first big CME hit. The bodies were badly decomposing in the heat and the smell in the area was unbearable.

We back tracked back to Shadwell and took a secondary route around that brought us two miles down on the interstate beyond the sea of cars.

"They were there from the beginning," West said as he drove. "No one will be on that section we skipped. But if you want to go back..."

"No." I shook my head. "We keep going forward."

I thought about the possibility that my husband didn't get back on the interstate, what if he went north? The country was vast, and unless we had a lead, we were searching for a needle in a haystack.

"Why didn't people pay attention?" I asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"They were warned this was a possibility. I grabbed the last newspaper when I went to the drug store, they said it could happen."

"Not globally," West said. "You left the newspaper out. I read the article. It was stating it could be localized like in India. So everyone suffered from the 'it won't happen to me', syndrome. Would you have paid attention? And that newspaper would have been out just before half the people went to bed."

"There was the news." I shrugged. "And to answer your question, probably not. I wouldn't have listened. I'm still stuck on the fact that if Ken was out there, I would stay put. Because I'd be damn well certain he'd make his way back."

"I can't even venture to guess why your husband left town. But you have to assume he did it for your daughter. She had to be his first priority, so he left because he needed to protect her. They kept moving, because you heard what that man said yesterday. Washington, Fredericksburg shut down the grids."

"What is out east that can't be found here?"

"Um, if they shut down the grid beforehand ... normalcy. People."

"I don't think that's true," I said. "If you think about it, if

Washington DC was shutting down the grid, that means it was a government thing. If that was the case then the whole country would have ..." My words were interrupted by the ringing of the wind up alarm clock. I knew it was coming but, when it rang, it caused me to jump.

"That went fast. Nothing is coming through on the radio. You want to keep going or stop and wait it out?"

"Can we stop first chance?" I asked. "I need to tighten my bandages, and I think I need some sun, the air conditioning is cold in here."

"Audrey, I'm conserving gas, the air isn't on." He reached his hand over.

I backed up. "What are you doing?"

Despite my protest, he placed the back of his hand on my forehead. "Jesus, Audrey, you're burning up."

"West, I'm okay."

"I'm sure you are, how are you feeling?"

"I just told you, I'm okay."

"I'm pulling over. There's a rest area in two miles. We'll pull over there. You rewrap, rest, take some ibuprofen for the fever."

I knew I had to be slightly feverish, just the feeling of being chilled told me that. Though I did doubt I was burning up. I was weak and in some pain, but nothing I couldn't handle.

Just as we passed the one mile to rest area sign, we saw smoke. Not much, but enough to make me worry.

Here we go again, I thought. Then as we rounded the bend, we saw that wasn't the case.

An old Volkswagen van was parked in the grass in front of the rest area building. A tent emerged from the side of the van, four people sat under it.

The smoke was caused by someone grilling.

It was obviously made into a campsite, from what I could see there were two family size tents, a few older cars, and people moved about. I couldn't gauge how many.

We parked a little bit from them, and stepped from the car.

"Did you want to go in the building and wrap?" West asked me.

I looked over to the rest area and noticed we had captured their attention.

"No," I said. "I'll do it here."

Troy had given me his short-sleeved, button down baseball shirt, and it was so much easier to take off.

I stayed on the passenger side of the car, cautiously removing the shirt.

"Here, let me help," West stepped to me.

"I got it."

"I'm sure you do. I'm also sure, if I wrap you it will be consistently firm."

Relenting, I raised my hands as best as I could, and West stepped up to me. He unwrapped the Ace bandages, rolling them as he did.

"The bruising is minimal," he said. "I was worried."

"They're just sore."

"Can you do me a favor?" he asked. "Can you take a deep breath for me?"

I lifted my eyes to him, then attempted a breath. It made it only so far and I coughed.

"You're not doing your deep breaths," he said. "Are you?"

"I'm trying."

"You need to do them and cough, just ... just play it safe."

I was sure we were a spectacle, the entertainment for the day. A half-dressed woman being wrapped like a mummy.

When he finished he helped me put on my shirt.

"Do you recognize anyone?" he asked.

I leaned to my right and peered beyond him. "Not really."

"Let's go over and see if anyone knows anything," he said.

Before walking over to the camp, I checked the time on the clock, then grabbed one of the flashlights and placed it on the ground a few feet from the car.

Fifteen minutes had passed since the alarm went off.

"Something smells good," I said. "I wonder what they're making."

"They could be cooking rat, but if it's on a grill it's going to smell awesome to me."

"That's just gross."

A woman stood by the grill a short distance from the tents. She looked at us, set down the utensil she was using and made her way over.

"Are you alright?" she asked, looking directly at me. "Do you need help?"

Her stare made me self-conscious, did I look that bad?

Before I could answer, West did. "No, we're looking for people," he said. "Her family."

"Are they from Palmyra?" she asked. "We're all from that area. About twenty of us."

"No," I shook my head. "Have you run into any other groups?"

"I'm sorry, we haven't," she replied. "We are on our way to Fredericksburg. We heard a radio transmission about a camp there. Big one. It wasn't the camp making the call. Just some guy."

"You can't be going there now, are you?" West asked.

"We are. Probably would have been there already had one of our

vehicles not conked out.” She pointed to two men that worked on a truck. “As soon as it’s fixed we’ll be going. We pitched the tents because it may not be until tomorrow.”

“Listen there’s a good chance North Anna will meltdown,” West said.

She shook her head with a scoff. “No. I’m pretty sure that’s secure. Why would everyone be going to Fredericksburg if it wasn’t.”

“Are you leading the pilgrimage?” West asked.

She laughed at him. “Pilgrimage. Um ... no. If anyone is sort of in charge it’s Bill Thomas. Big fella playing cards under the tent.”

“I’m going to go talk to him,” West said.

The woman again looked at me. “Are you sure you don’t need something. Some water, something?”

“No, thank you.” I then looked at West. “Go talk to him, I’m going to head into the rest room.”

West didn’t question when I said I had to excuse myself. He just gave me a look, and then headed over toward the tent where Bill was seated with three other men playing cards at a table. It wasn’t that I had to ‘go’, I didn’t. I needed to see a mirror. It hit me that I hadn’t looked at my reflection in days. I needed to see what others saw. Why everyone felt the need to ask me if I wanted help. Did I really look that bad? Was I fooling myself and truly was sicker than I thought. I started to question things. Maybe the tightness in my chest wasn’t the Ace bandage but rather pneumonia settling into my lungs. Maybe I was fevered worse than I believed. Maybe my hand stopped hurting, not because it was healing, but rather because it was completely dead. In any case, I needed to take a look at my reflection, and hopefully, the water was running so I could splash my face.

I walked over to the rest area building. My arm wrapped around my waist bracing my chest as I walked. It felt better that way. Even though the woman cooking on the grill indicated that it was impossible that my family was there, because they weren’t from around their area, I still looked at every face that I passed. Looking to see if there were some sense of familiarity. Maybe one of Waynesboro people joined them and they didn’t know. Wishful thinking, I suppose.

When I made it into the building it was dark, the only light came in through the double glass door and the windows near the ceiling. It was chilly in there. Then again, I probably was the only one not complaining of the heat. The bathroom smelled stale and of human waste. It lingered, probably mixing with the humidity in the air. I went into the ladies’ room passing a woman as I did. She stared at me. The entire time she walked by me, she stared at me. I really worried about how bad I looked. It wasn’t a vanity thing. It was more that I was suddenly scared that I was far worse than I allowed myself to feel.

It didn't hit me or dawn on me until that moment that there was a chance that I may not find my family, not because of any search being unsuccessful, but because of my failing health. And even if I did, was there a possibility I wouldn't be around to enjoy them?

When I finally made it in front of the mirror, not even the dim lit ladies room could hide my horrible reflection. I was terrified. I didn't recall looking so drained, so pale. My eyes were dark and I looked as if I aged ten years. Maybe it was the lack of make-up, I rarely went anywhere without it, or at least a touch. But I did look bad. I wanted to cry. What had caused it? My hand? The electrocution? A combination of both?

At that moment, I started to feel self-conscious and I just wanted to grab West, head back to the car and wait for the surge to be over. Before leaving the bathroom, I turned on the faucet. The water trickled out into my free hand, and I brought it to my face.

It was cold, a painful cold that felt like needles and pins to my skin.

When I left the bathroom, I thought maybe it was my imagination that I heard a motor. It wasn't loud, but it was a steady hum. I moved across the rest area and that was when I saw the bright orange extension cord. It came through the other set of double doors, ran across the lobby and over the counter into the visitor information desk.

I wasn't aware how much time had passed, but I certainly knew we were close to the next surge. The extension cord ran outside, snaking across the grass, between the two tents and finally to a small generator ten feet from everyone.

I made my way over to the Volkswagen van, where I saw West standing and talking to a man I assumed was Bill.

"Hey," I said to West, anxious to tell him about what I saw.

"Oh, hey, Audrey this is Bill."

I acknowledged Bill with a look. "West ..."

"Apparently, people passed through yesterday when they broke down. They gave them a ride to the Walmart about ten miles east of here," West said. "To get them parts. Not the right ones, anyhow, there is doctor there, a camp. Kind of a midway station to the interchange of sixty-four and ninety-five."

"I don't understand," Bill said. "If you're going to Fredericksburg, why are you going the long way?"

West looked at him. "We figured they may not have known about Fredericksburg, we'll take the short route back."

They spoke as if I weren't there, no matter how many times I opened my mouth.

Bill shook his head. "You may not need to hit the interchange. If



that doc saw them, you can save yourselves some miles. Plus, maybe he can help you.” He directed his comment at me.

“Yeah, Audrey, that may not be ...”

“Stop.” I held up my hand. “They have a generator.”

“Okay,” West said.

“It’s running.”

“I don’t hear it.”

“You wouldn’t,” Bill said. “It’s one of those new ...”

West screamed a shocking, “Ugh!” that silenced Bill. “You can’t run it. Shut it off.”

“We need to run it,” Bill replied. “We have Mrs. Magnus. She’s eighty-nine, breathing problems, this heat is too much.”

“I’m not saying shut it down for good. For now, right now.” West turned to me. “How much time.”

“It’s going to be any minute.”

“What?” Bill asked.

“Another surge,” West said.

“You can’t possibly know ...”

“We do. Shut it off now,” West urged. “I’ll go get you the schedule. We have two people who have been watching ...”

“Watching what?” Bill questioned.

“Just ... shut it down. I’ll explain after I get the charts.”

“Fine.”

West took hold of my arm and led me from Bill and the table.

I heard Bill shout out the order to shut down the generator. To which he was met with questions.

“Jesus,” West picked up the pace, passing Grill Lady. “We’ll go get the chart, share it, we have extra flashlights. But until ...”

I stopped. “Oh my God.”

“What?”

I raised my arm to show the hair standing on end.

He went from looking at my arm to raising his eyes and turning around.

I believe it was the first time he and I both actually witnessed it.

In my mind’s eye, I expected something visual, a spark perhaps, a blue lightning bolt. Instead, there were more sounds. A hum, then crackle as the generator snapped with electricity and a slight surge sounded. No screams, just thuds as those around the power cord flew five feet in the air, and backwards, landing on the ground. Those who weren’t immediately shocked, raced to help those who were and stupidly became conductors.

We were helpless, there was nothing we could do.

There was no way to help without succumbing ourselves.

The entire event took all of ten seconds ... if that.

When it was over, there was an immediate silence, followed instantly by the gut wrenching cries, as Grill Lady, the lone survivor of her town, dropped to her knees and screamed. One scream after another, she didn't stop, she just kept screaming.

## 31 – CART RETURN

Bill didn't make it ... obviously. Had he just stayed put, not moved, not been the one to reach for the generator, he more than likely would have been alive.

The three men playing cards with Bill could have made it, but they all ran off to help, making themselves victims as well.

West tried to help. After it was done, he moved to one of the card players and started CPR. He hoped it would work because the man wasn't directly shocked.

It didn't.

The generator must have sparked, because there was smoke coming from it, and the ground had been blackened.

Mrs. Magnus, the old woman in the rest area, the reason for the generator was burned to an unrecognizable state. She smoldered more than the furniture around her.

Of the twenty plus people at that camp, only one person lived. Grill Lady, or Sandy as we learned. She was hysterical at first, then in shock.

We couldn't leave her behind, she had to come with us. She didn't want to at first, screaming and crying that we had to bury her friends.

There was no way that we could do that. We simply didn't have the minutes to spare. West helped her move everyone into a common area, even that took time. When it was all said and done, and we made it to the car, we were five hours from the next surge and eighteen from the big CME. Still, enough time to get it all done. We were cutting it close

Sandy had only a few things she wanted to bring, but she didn't say much when we got to the car, she sat in the back seat, staring forward.

Before we got back in, West set the alarm clock and grabbed a map. He spread it out on the hood and marked the area of the campsite.

"We haven't made much progress, have we?" I asked.

"Considering the road conditions, I will say we did."

I peered around him to peek at the map. When I leaned to the left, I coughed. West looked at me as if I just passed the Bubonic Plague his way.

I ignored him and pointed. "You have two more circles inside your radius area."

"The big circle is a hundred mile radius. Beyond that is my safe zone," he said. "We are in the second circle. That is the fifty mile

radius, that's what the government evacuates to,"

"The little circle. We're far from that."

"Right now not really. Maybe thirty miles," he said. "Unless we go to ninety-five, we will be in the ten mile radius at some point. Hopefully we won't be there when North Anna goes."

"That's the bad area?"

"Without protection, once the core melts down, that area is life threatening. Within hours the radiation dosage is deadly. Then again, wind and everything factors in."

"So the area around it, would be destroyed because of the explosion."

He shook his head. "When there's a meltdown, there is rarely an explosion. A massive amount of radioactive steam is released. Unless, there is hydrogen built up. Then it explodes. Even then we're not talking a fireball. In that two mile radius, if anyone is there they start getting that deadly dose immediately."

"But no one knows what something like this would do," I said.

"Science is science. The CME may cause a surge that ignites the generators and blows the building, but the core will still react the same. Radiation pours out. My concern isn't just on one, it's that they're all gonna go and they'll go within hours and days, some probably already have."

"What happens if we're in this ten mile area?" I asked.

"We will only be in that ten mile area if we think your family is there. If they're in Fredericksburg, we bypass it. That's my plan."

"Okay, but let's say they are there. What ..." I paused to cough again, this time wincing as a sharp pain radiated into my shoulder. "What happens if we're there when it goes?"

"We get out."

"And if we didn't find my family?"

West folded the map. "We get out. It's suicide to stay. Especially in your already weakened state. I'm sorry, Audrey, if they're in there when it goes we need to pray they get out. If you stay in there to look, you will die before you find them."

I lowered my head some. I was finished with my science lesson for the day. I took another dose of ibuprofen and got back in the car.

I wish there was a medication that would ease the ache in my soul. Because with the way things were going, my family would be in that area, or at least on their way through. My journey had been a prime example of Murphy's law. In fact, I started to believe I was jinxed, some sort of witness to the end and angel of death. That all they had was me. My fault, like so many sins of the past I was paying for. Granted that was giving myself a lot of credit for a lot of bad. But it seemed that way.

Just before the event, my son, leaves and walked right into it. Charlie ... died. Ralph and Doris were fine, and then they died. Then there was Amanda, that poor woman suffered beyond comprehension. It didn't stop there, my neighbor Roy, alive when we found him, dead when we left. Now, the people of the Palmyra camp. It all began when Pole Man died at my feet.

I didn't say much on the short trip to the Walmart, I stared out the window in my own world, thinking about movies and stories of the apocalypse, ones I watched or read, where I yelled at the screen because the main survival group would meet up with people who had it together and then those people would die.

That was me.

"You okay?" West asked.

I rolled my eyes slightly annoyed at that question. "Yeah, just thinking, why are you asking?"

"You're coughing a lot."

I hadn't even noticed, I must have looked at him as if he were nuts.

"We're here," West announced.

Not far ahead the big recognizable blue and white sign reached for the sky. I didn't know what to expect when we pulled into the parking lot. Was the camp in the store? Spread out across the lot. I hoped for hundreds of people, maybe even spotting Ken or Michael.

It was pretty bare. A few cars scattered in the parking, I guessed they were early morning shoppers at the store when everything fell apart.

There were a few people, not many, and about a dozen tents set up with camping gear, probably scooped up from inside the store.

In the midst of it all was one white tent. It stood out. That had to be the main one.

When the car stopped I looked back to Sandy. "We're here. We'll get you help."

"Then what?" she said sadly. "Everyone I know is dead."

"Yeah, me, too," West opened the door and stepped out.

I was a bit shocked at how he just blurted that out. After opening the back door for Sandy, I walked to the front of the car with West.

"I hope everyone here doesn't die in an hour," I said.

"Why would you say that?" he asked.

"Because it seems to happen that way."

"I noticed that, too."

No sooner did Sandy join us, a thin, younger man wearing scrubs hurried out of the white tent. He rushed our way.

"I take it you are here for help, as well?" he asked. "Doctor Lange. Adam Lange."

“Carl West. This is my friend Audrey and Sandy.”

“Come with me.” He turned and led the way to the tent. “There’s not another transport until tomorrow, but your welcome to take a tent.”

“Are you by yourself here?” I asked.

“No. There are four of us. We are the go between place.” He stepped into the tent. There were at least two dozen cots and a few had patients. He pointed to what looked like an ambulance gurney behind a curtain, then looked at me. “If you want to hop on up there. I am guessing you survived electrocution.”

“Yes, but no, I don’t need help.” I watched as he looked at West.

“Audrey, maybe have him look,” West said.

“No.” I was adamant. “We don’t have time. Sandy is in shock, Doctor, she witnessed ... she witnessed her camp ... she witnessed them all die.”

“I understand. Stay here, I’ll be right back.” He took hold of Sandy’s arm and led her down the row of cots. I couldn’t hear what he said to her, but she nodded then laid down. He returned to us. “Now, why isn’t there enough time for me to examine you.”

Because I knew he was judging my health, I fought to stifle the coughs. Which in turn backfired, causing me to blast out a series of hacks that sounded horrendous.

He raised his eyebrows. “And you don’t need help?”

“Honestly, we don’t have time,” I explained, pausing to cough. “I am trying to find my family.”

“We believe they passed through here,” West said. “Or hope they did. They were traveling with a couple dozen people from their hometown.”

Adam handed me a bottle of water. “We don’t keep names unless we treat them.”

“Thank you,” I sipped the water. “I don’t know if any of them were hurt or sick. A man back in Charlottesville thought they were headed this way. Fredericksburg or D.C. Something about the grids being shut down before the event.”

Adam shook his head. “That’s the third time I heard that. Not true. Now ... it is true that a couple of our bases shut down, like with minutes to spare. Not areas. I don’t know about Washington, but in Fredericksburg there is an operating clinic, they radio out, it’s run by military, one of several in this area. They also are the place to go to find your family. They keep track and try to place people in safe areas until this is sorted out.”

“How do you know this?” West asked. “Are you in communication with them?”

“When they show up,” Adam replied. “Which is every morning.

They come by with a truck.” He looked over his shoulder. “Lot less people today than yesterday.”

“That’s dangerous,” I said. “And so are the generators in here.”

“I know when to shut them down,” he said. “They have that charted out. They have been spot on for times down to minutes.”

“We have a list of times, too,” West said. “I’d like to compare.”

“Absolutely,” Adam nodded. He looked again at me, when I coughed. “Let me listen to your lungs, just to check. Maybe there is something I can do to help.”

Again, I declined. “As you know we are on a race against the clock. If they are nearby I want to try to find them before they move out.”

West added, “And when the area becomes contaminated. I suppose you’ll be moving out, too.”

“What are you folks talking about?” He asked, then smiled. “Wait. Are you guys talking about North Anna melting down? No.” He waved out his hand. “They are monitoring that. Granted they are trying to cool it to stop a meltdown, but they are there. Trust me. People are even volunteering. They are confident they can cool the core before it hits critical.”

A part of me shivered out a breath of relief, then I remembered the next geomagnetic storm and what it could do to the generators. “What about the next CME the big one?”

“We had the big one,” he said.

West shook his head. “No, there’s another coming. An even bigger one. If that strikes, those generators won’t be safe.”

“Where are you getting this from?” Adam asked.

“Colonel Jane Ladka, she worked for NASA and, well, an astronomy student. But they are right about the small ones,” West said.

“I’m sure they are,” replied Adam “But they’re wrong about the big one. You have those two folks, I get it, but trust me there is a panel of six out of Quantico, and while there is a CME coming, it’s not as big as the one that took us all down.”

“So what do we do?” I asked. “What do we believe?”

“You err on the side of caution,” said Adam. “It’s better to be surprised when nothing happens, than angry and ill prepared when it does.”

“Could I see the list of the people you treated?” I asked. “Maybe I’ll recognize a name or something.”

“Sure,” Adam replied as he walked toward a desk. “You said there were a couple dozen?”

“Yes. A transformer blew in the neighborhood and no one had electricity. That’s how they all survived.”

Adam stopped walking. He looked over his shoulder. "Was this group traveling in old trucks? One was ... oh wait. It was a red landscaping truck., With the name spray painted on it. Was it ..."

Excitedly, I blurted out. "Caleb Cobb Landscaping? With a badly drawn ..."

"Ear of corn." Adam snapped his finger. "Yes. Some guy said he was the mayor."

I was so over run with enthusiasm, I jumped and squealed. "When ... where?"

"They followed the transport two days ago. I can tell you the route they would have taken."

West placed his hands on my arms and turned me to face him. He smiled. "We know where they went. See we ... Audrey?"

When he turned me, he gave me that slight jolt, I felt my head spin some, not enough to worry about. Until he stared at me, and I realized I couldn't speak. Was I moving my mouth? I tried. My eyes felt heavy and a black veil took over my vision, first clouding out West, until I couldn't see him.

His voice sounded far way. "Audrey?"

I felt my knees buckle as I made one more attempt to call his name, "West."

What was happening?



## 32 – CARPENTERS' WARNING

I didn't actually lose consciousness until the moment they placed me on the cot. Before that I was weak, unable to move, I could hear West but my ability to respond was hindered.

When I woke up, I felt better, stronger, but scared. I knew time had passed. It felt like it had, I just didn't know how much. I must have sat up when I woke, because Adam inched me back.

"Easy, easy," he said.

"What time is it? We have to go," I stated panicked.

"We have time," West replied. "You need to be strong."

"I feel better, I do. Not as foggy."

"You were dehydrated," Adam told me. "You're fevered, you also have pneumonia in your lower left lobe, and that hand ... you are one step away from developing sepsis. I'd hit you with an antibiotic, but Audrey, you are in serious need of medical attention. More than I can give here."

"Either way," Audrey said. "I have to leave here to get it, right?"

"Yes, but I'm thinking more along the lines of keeping you on the IV and sending you with the truck when it arrives tomorrow."

"No offense Doc," West said. "But we have our travel system worked out so we don't fall into the deadly car trap and get electrocuted. I don't trust anyone else. What if ... what if you keep the IV in, we'll tape it behind her in the seat of the car, I'll hold it when we walk and I promise, we will head straight to Fredericksburg. If we don't find her family on the way, we'll get the medical help there. Bottom line, we need to go and we need to go now."

*Thank you, West,* I thought.

He looked at me. "Audrey, if we don't find them, we can rest assured, they are not in the little circle. That's the big thing. What do you say, Doc?"

"Considering you'll get there faster than waiting on the truck, I'll agree. Walking has to be kept to a minimum."

We both agreed. I was grateful for the IV, for some reason whatever he was pumping in my veins did give me more energy and I didn't feel as bad.

Adam give the quick and dirty lesson to West on how to change the IV bag, how to take out and then bandage the cannula, and how to administer the pain medication. He included an inhaler to help me breathe, along with an IV pole in case we did have to walk or get out, something I thought was unnecessary. We shoved it in the backseat instead of arguing about it.

In no time we were back on the road. Problem was, between my little passing out episode, and mini medical training, we had only fifteen hours.

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The IV tubing connected to my left arm draped across my lap, leading to a bag. West had conveniently rigged the IV by running tape through the bag loop and attaching it to the ‘oh shit’ bar above the passenger’s door.

Adam had mapped out the route the military rescue trucks had taken, and indicated places that they stopped when a pulse or surge was due to occur.

It was evident that the military took that road. Cars that had been stranded on the road were pushed to the side creating a unique type of guard railing.

The route made both West and I nervous, as it took us straight through Mineral, Virginia, home of North Anna Nuclear Power Plant.

We’d get there soon, I was sure. Through the danger area to Fredericksburg and there would be a way around to get back safely.

“Two hours,” I said, reading the comparison times between what Troy had given us and the ones Adam gave. “Theirs is one hour. You know, looking at this, they have a surge coming at the same time as our big CME.”

“You’re not doubting the Colonel, are you?”

“No, not at all. Just hoping she’s wrong. It makes me feel better knowing there are people working to keep the plant from meltdown.”

“Yeah, me, too. Let’s hope it’s the same everywhere. You know ... we’ve been traveling together and I know nothing about your husband and daughter. Just Michael.”

“Story of my life. I focused so much energy on trying to reach him, that’s all I did.”

“It’s your kid. I focused all my energy on trying to heal my son,” West said.

“How horrible that had to be for you. I am so sorry.”

“Thank you. You did it again, you know that right?”

“What?”

“Talked about Michael instead of your husband.”

I cringed. “See. You know, we’ll have time to talk about them. My family. Your son. I’d like to do that and ...” I tilted my head when the radio cackled with broken music. The entire time we kept that radio

on and it scanned. Finally it hit something.

West reached out and turned up the volume.

“That’s not a warning static, is it?” I asked.

“No.” West smiled at me. “It’s a signal.”

The music came in clear, it sounded old, like something from the fifties. A smooth male voice with ‘oohs’ and ‘bops’. The song ended and a male voice came on.

“Gotta love it, gotta love it,” the DJ said. “This is Benton the voice of survival, coming to you folks. Might as well add a little music to the warning system. The gents at Quantico tell me we are in the ‘any time now’ mode, so when you hear the cackle of static, you know what to do. Shut it down, step on back. Until then, how about this perfect number?”

I looked at West when the seventies sound of fingerpicking guitar and keyboards began. “Any time now? That’s not right.”

“Give an hour leeway it could be.”

The vocals of the song came on and it caused me to stop and look quizzically at the radio.

*“There’s a kind of hush ...” Karen Carpenter sang. “All over the world, tonight. All over the world you can hear the sound of...”*

I laughed. “Oh my God. There’s a kind of hush.”

“There is really, if you think about.”

*“Just the two of us. And nobody else ...”*

Static.

It did as DJ Benton said, the radio cackled and hissed.

West hit the brake, threw the car in park and shut it off. He grabbed one of the flashlights, flicking it on as he tossed it out the widow and watched.

My heart raced, would we be safe in the car?

It wasn’t even a split second later, I could hear the flashlight rattling on the ground. Sitting back, I exhaled, my hand at my chest, in shock at how close that was. I relaxed only a moment when, I jolted again and sat straight up at the sound of a loud crash.

It was definitely a car hitting into something.

West looked straight ahead, then back out the driver’s window. “Okay, flashlight is done. It’s safe.” He reached for the ignition.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. And someone may need our help.”

I took a breath, as deep as I could when West started the engine and put the car in gear.

That someone needed help was doubtful to me. More than likely, like everyone else who died on the road, their car became their own personal electrocution chariot.

We went around the bend and not only did we see where the

vehicle veered off the road, we saw what it was. A truck with the recognizable hand-painted name and logo on the side. Standing outside were two men.

I know West saw it too.

"West," I spoke hurriedly, seeing the Caleb Cobb Landscaping truck with that godawful cob of corn on the side with a lawnmower. "The truck."

"I know." He slowed down.

The two men stepped into the center of the road, waving their arms for us to stop.

"Do you recognize them?" West asked.

"No. Not at all. West, they have the truck. How did they get it? Oh my God."

"Calm down. Stay cool. Let me handle it."

West inched the car toward the men. One was a tall man with sandy blonde hair, the other slightly shorter with a baseball cap. My eyes kept shifting to the hand-painted decal on the truck.

"Boy are we glad to see you," the tall man hunched down, peering in the window. "We ..."

"Where'd you get the truck?" It just blurted from me in a pretty accusatory tone.

West glared my way for jumping the gun.

"Some guy named Walt. Said him and his group didn't need it they were staying put for a while."

West looked at me. "Do you know a Walt?"

"Yeah, that's the mayor."

The tall man chuckled. "Yeah, he said that. I didn't believe him."

"Where are they?" I asked.

"Over at Rocky Branch Campground," he answered.

"Are they okay? Did you see any kids?" My speech was quick.

"Yes. Two. Girls I think. One is little. Not sure, listen, we just want to get home."

"We just came from that way," West said. "Louisa is about a mile and a half away. I can drive you up there, I'm sure we can scavenge a vehicle."

"Nah." The tall man lifted his eyes to the sky and stood, "That ain't gonna work."

I jumped back when the one in a baseball cap extended the end of a crossbow through the open driver window.

"We're just gonna take yours," said Tall Man. "Now put the car in park ... now. No one gets hurt. Now."

My heart raced out of control. We should have known. Should have been more cautious. They had the truck.

"Okay. Okay." West did what he was told. "Look we have stuff.

Just let us grab..."

"Out."

The car door opened slightly, Baseball Cap Man retracted the crossbow, and West lifted his hands in the air, turning his body as if he were getting out. Just as he did, he kicked open the car door. The force of which caught the crossbow knocking it away, and in swinging outward nailed Tall Man, sending him off balance.

West turned again to get into the car. When he extended his hand for the gear shift, Baseball Cap Man, reached in grabbing him. He pulled at West trying to get him out, and West would have won that battle had Tall Man not reached in as well.

They pulled him from the car.

"West!" I screamed.

The car door shut, then I saw West's back slam into the window.

My back was pressed against my own door, watching in horror. I couldn't breathe, or move, I was shaking. It was a flurry of moving bodies, back and forth in a fight, and my view of it was limited to what was framed by the driver's side window.

It was happening so fast, all I knew was I had to do something. My mind spun trying to think of what that could be, which way I could help. but I was jolted from my train of thought with each thud and bang against the car.

'Get out,' I thought. '*Grab the keys then get out.*' I reached forward for the keys, my fingers slipped in the keychain loop when my door opened fast and I felt the sensation of nothingness against my back as I flew out. My head bounced off a person and as I reached out, trying to get a hold of anything to get back into the car, I felt the tubing of the IV line wrap around my neck.

I got out one scream. One ... that was it. The keys dropped to my lap as I defensively and instinctively, grasped at the tubing around my throat. The bandaged hand was useless and I pulled the tubing with my left, trying to break it, to make it give, anything. It pulled tighter, crushing into my larynx, cutting off my air.

As I twisted and turned in my desperate struggle, the cannula ripped from my arm and with every move I made, it flapped around.

In that split second it dawned on me what to do and with that thought, I knew a second was all I had.

Looking down I could see them.

I pulled my fingers from the line around my neck, gasped as the grip of it tightened, grabbed the keys that lay in my lap, and with that one shot, hoping against hope that I didn't miss, I stabbed a key it as hard as I could into the hands around my throat.

It was enough.

He not only screamed, he released the strangle hold.

I was unable to move, trying to catch my breath. I barely did when he grabbed me, yanked me from the car and threw me to the ground.

The hard fall sent a searing pain through my torso as I landed. He sailed his foot into my side, the force behind it rolled me onto my back.

He stood above me, from the angle he looked towering. Just as he lunged, he froze. The tip of an arrow emerged from the base of his throat, extended about two inches, and he dropped to his knees, before falling face first at my feet.

I inched up some from the ground and I saw West standing there holding the crossbow.

He dropped the bow to the ground and hurried to my side.

“Hey. I’m sorry.” West reached for me.

I panted to catch my breath. Overwrought with emotions over what had just transpired, I didn’t know how to react, whether to cry or scream in gratefulness. I sifted through everything I was feeling, then plopped back down to the ground.

## 33 – UNDER THE PAINTED SKY

“So much for the efforts of chivalry.” West kicked the flat rear driver’s side tire, it had an arrow protruding from it.

I sat on the ground my back against the car. It felt good to lean against a firm surface. It was hard to talk, my throat felt clogged and breathing was difficult. Each breath was sharp and painful. West had rewrapped my chest and that helped. “I take it ... no spare?”

“No.” He stepped away from the tires, exposing Baseball Cap Man who lay on the ground, face down, arms spread, a pool of blood surrounding his upper body.

West crouched down before me, turned my focus away from the body to him. “Hey.”

My eyes drifted back to the body. “Tell me the truth, you’re really some sort of trained killer.”

West chuckled. “Don’t be too impressed. I was getting my ass kicked until the one went for you. Then it was a fair fight.”

I looked at his face and saw the evidence of his battle. His nose was swollen, as was his top lip. A huge bruise had already begun to form around his eye.

“The car is a bust. You can’t walk. I’m going to go into Louisa. It’s not that far. I think there are a bunch of houses on the way. I’ll try to get us a car. There have to be cars that weren’t running, right? It’s going to be dark soon, I need to get moving.”

“Should I wait in the car?”

“No, it’s too hot. You’ll get that forgotten baby syndrome.” He slid his hand behind my back and braced my arm. “Ready to stand?”

I nodded.

After a count of three, I stood with his help. It was painful.

“There’s a tree over there. Let’s put you under it.”

“Like Jim,” I said.

“Who is Jim?”

“From *The Walking Dead* show. First season, they put a guy named Jim under a tree to die.”

“That makes no sense to me but .... you aren’t going to die.” West said.

“Don’t put me under a tree.”

“It’s cooler.”

“I have a fever. I’m shivering. Everything is cold.”

“Okay. You can sit in the car, but the doors all stay open.”

“Agreed.”

West opened the driver’s side door. He moved the seat back to

make room and helped me inside. He reclined the seat and handed me a bottle of water.

"I'll be back," he said. "Then we head out."

"Do you think they were lying? Do you think they really did see them at the campsite?"

"Yeah, I do," West said. "He knew Walt's name. We have to go by there. We check it out anyhow, then head to Fredericksburg. You need to go to the med camp there. We have time. We have a little more than thirteen hours. Enough time to get to the campsite and then out of range."

"Did you look at the map? Do you know where this camp is?"

"I do." He looked away for a second. "It's across the lake from North Anna."

I whimpered out, "Oh my God. If North Anna ... It's not just radiation, if it goes ..."

"No. We have time. He clasped my hand. "I'll be right back and be as fast as I can." He stepped back.

I didn't release his hand. "West. Thank you."

He forced a closed mouth smile. I released his hand and he walked away.

I was alone, but I wasn't afraid. I was too sick and sore for that. My lips were dry, and I brought the water to my mouth, taking a sip. It was a bad angle to drink, and I choked a little on it. I kept thinking how the IV had kept me hydrated and the medicine in it helped. I felt the effects of not having it. While there was another bag, the only cannula we had was in the hand of my assailant and I wasn't putting that back in my body.

Maybe not in the way it was intended, but that IV saved my life.

My body shivered, but the sun felt good as it beat through the windshield. Even though the clock was ticking, I was confident we would get there. I just had to wait until West returned, I closed my eyes and rested.

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I dreamt.

It had been the first time since the event that I truly dreamt, and I wish I hadn't.

It was horrible.

I was back on the highway, the day after leaving Gridlock. Wandering through the sea of cars, looking inside, at each face. But



instead of strangers annihilated by the freak of nature, they were people I knew.

Co-workers, the cashier at the gas station, the woman who worked at the donut store ... Ken, Molly. Every nameless face was suddenly no longer nameless. They were people I spoke to, cared about ... loved. Maybe the dream was my subconscious way of saying that even if I didn't know the strangers in the car, someone out there did. Someone out there loved them.

I couldn't find Michael. I was consumed with that same panicked worry I so often had when he didn't answer my call or text. Then I spotted him. His lifeless body was pinned between his motorcycle and the guardrail.

I walked over to him.

He opened his eyes.

"Mom."

That one call of my name felt like it was outside my ears, loud enough to wake me, and I opened my eyes.

Silence.

No one was there. For a moment, in my deepest wishful thinking, I hoped that Michael found me, was standing outside the car calling my name.

But it was a dream, and I wished I could shake the overwhelming feeling of defeat and grief the dream brought.

I had to remind myself, I didn't find them dead, they were alive out there ... I hoped.

Then I realized it was dark. West hadn't returned. Immediately I worried. Not because I was alone, but rather I feared something happened to him. I could hear the ticking of the wind up clock in the car, but I couldn't see it anywhere.

I couldn't stay in the car. I had to move forward, find West.

My head felt like I had the world's worst hangover and my body had been hit by a truck, all while I carried an extra twenty pounds around my chest.

I swung my legs out of the car.

The moment my feet sat firmly on the asphalt and I tried to stand, daggers of pain shot from my hips to my chest. I grabbed onto the door to aid me in standing. I just had to move, work my muscles and I'd be fine. Using the car as a crutch, I moved forward. The smell outside the car was unbearable. The pungent smell of death filled the air from the fresh bodies and the old ones still remaining in the cars. Just as I arrived at the hood of the car, wondering how I would move forward without holding on, I saw the headlights approaching.

They grew closer and the tires rolled over the loose gravel as the car came to a stop.

I shielded my eyes, blinded by the headlights and I heard the car door open.

“Audrey, what the hell are you doing?” West asked. “I told you I would be back.”

He did and he was.

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“Sorry I took so long,” West said as he drove. “I checked every house, it became hard looking for keys, and the process was taking forever. Please drink your water.”

I took a sip and coughed. My chest rumbled like a forty-year, two pack a day smoker.

“Finally, I found a dealership in Louisa. There’s enough gas to get us to Fredericksburg.”

“How are you?” I asked.

“Sore as hell. But I’ll be fine. You?”

“Sore as hell. I feel better, though.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah. Tired. A part of this feels like a dream. Like I’m hallucinating.”

“You may be. Neither of us has really slept in two days.”

“Don’t be so sure. I had a hell of a dream. Which means I slept. I can drive.”

West laughed at that.

He narrated the short trip to Louisa. “That’s the house where I grabbed the power drink,” or “That house had a kick ass SUV, I couldn’t find the keys” and “I could smell the bodies outside the bed and breakfast so I didn’t go in.”

Louisa was a short, one main road, town where American flags hung on the lampposts lining the street. When we passed the car dealership, West slowed down to show me. I saw where he busted the front window.

It was also the point when he told me, “Fifteen miles. That’s all. Fifteen miles.”

Fifteen miles to the campsite, forty until Fredericksburg and twenty until we cleared the ten mile radius danger zone. We were in it, officially in it, the moment we drove through Louisa.

I reflected back to the days when I’d take road trips, sixty miles always took sixty minutes. I thought that was about to the campsite and then Fredericksburg.

I wouldn't take long to get to the camp, to search and hopefully find my family, then go onward. Our window of safety was vast due to the minimal amount of travel we had.

We both were positive that the people of Waynesboro were at the campground. The two men had the truck and knew the Mayor's name. I could see Walt giving them the truck, he was a good man like that. "Go home," he probably told them. "Find your family. We aren't going anywhere."

Whether Walt liked it or not, once we got there we were moving them.

Quickly too.

If by some chance Michael wasn't there, then after I was well, I would begin my search for him. Maybe even ask West if he wanted to join me. He said he needed the purpose.

The optimistic mood and fantasy of reunion was brief and ended four miles outside of Louisa as we passed the Thomas Jefferson Elementary school.

The nighttime sky lit up and the car illuminated with a daylight brightness. The radio crackled and hissed, but unlike before it was weird and pulsing.

"Shit." West hit the brakes and shut off the car.

"Too soon," I said. "It's too soon."

"Maybe it's just a longer warning." West peered closer to the windshield, then grabbed the door handle.

Snap!

I heard it.

The snap of static electricity.

He pulled back his hand quickly and looked at me.

"Did you just get shocked?"

"Yeah. Did you see that?" he asked.

"No."

Slowly he brought his hand to the door handle again, an inch from it, the tiniest lightning bolt generated from the metal of the handle to his finger with another snap.

He jolted his hand away.

"The Faraday suit and gloves. Where are they?" I asked.

"Back at the other car." He winced. "Sorry."

I couldn't help but scoff a laugh. It figured, all that trouble we went to get them, the brilliancy of the idea and we didn't even have them when we needed them.

"We need to get out of here," he said.

"It's been five seconds. Maybe it's over."

Again, he reached for the handle and was shocked. "Nope."

"You need an insulator. Something to pad between you and the

metal so you can ..." I looked down to my bandaged hand.

"What?" West asked.

I wasn't worried about the pain, my fingers had long stopped hurting and the only pain I had was a constant dull ache in my palm. I brought my bandaged hand down to the handle, and even though my fingers wouldn't grip it, I was able to wedge it in there and pull enough to open the door. Any pain I thought was gone, reappeared with the pressure of opening that door. I cringed, took a second, and then swung out my legs.

Zap!

The tiny prickly shocks reached out and snapped at me as I crossed the doorway. Outside I felt renewed slightly and I shook off the pins and needle charges that moved through my body.

"Come on," I told West.

He took off his shirt and used that to open the door. I could hear the same thing happen to him, the snaps of electric current hitting him as he made his escape.

I watched as he put his shirt back on and then I looked up.

It wasn't daylight, but it was bright.

The sky swirled with an abundance of bright colors, streaking across the night sky. Blue, green and purple. Like mixing food coloring into cake batter, swirling ... bursting. It was absolutely beautiful, but I also knew it was dangerous.

We stood ten feet in front of the car. West turned from left to right.

"Jesus, Audrey, do you feel that?" He rubbed his arms. "Do you feel it?"

The electricity was thick in the air. My ears began a dull ringing as I felt not only the hair on my arms stand on end, but my head began to tingle.

I reached up. My hair was literally standing on end I could feel the static. Just like the days when I would take off a knit cap in the winter. I ran my hand over to push it down, and it crackled.

It built, I could see it and feel it. The swirls in the sky moved quicker and grew brighter. Suddenly, it became clear that the deserted two lane road wasn't safe. It was lined with telephone poles connected with power lines, and those lines lit up. Tiny blue surges of power shot around like a fast growing vine.

West took hold of my arm and hurried me from the road to the open field, part of a yard to a home set back from the road in the distance.

The electricity grew in the air, it was thick, it didn't hurt, but I could feel it moving every fiber of my body, stronger, faster. My ears rang louder as sparks of light from the power lines shot out and the

night sky lit up with a breathtaking brightness that grew until it blasted down with such strength the jolt knocked us both from our feet and down into the grass of the field.

Instantly it was quiet.

Still.

Only for a moment.

I thought it was round two when the sky lit up again. This time, it wasn't the whole sky, it came from the horizon on the east. It brightened and lit up. As I stumbled to stand, I felt the vibration of the ground.

"West?" I called his name

A second or two later.

Boom.

It was in the distance, far enough away that it echoed and I knew ... I just knew.

"No."

Suddenly I wasn't in crushing pain, I wasn't breathless, I was me, before I was physically hurt. I couldn't think of anything at that moment but my family. Motivated by my fears and thoughts, I ran to the street

"Audrey!" West called me. "We have to go. Now. We have to go!"

What was wrong with his voice? It sounded weird, tinny, reverberated, with whoosh of electronics mixing with the constant high pitch ring in my ears.

"No." I stood in the road.

How big was it? It had to be huge for me to see it from where I stood.

The sky glowed around the huge single blue flame that shot high into the air. It went from blue, to white to orange in a matter of seconds, mixing with smoke, reminding me of the old steel mill pictures I would see in schoolbooks when I was a child.

It pulsed, and with every beat of the flame, the sky took on a strobe effect.

"No!" I screamed out. "No!"

Breaking down, I fell to the concrete, screaming out as I sobbed.

I was so close, so close.

So were they.

I didn't need to be a scientist, or a MIT graduate to know. If my family was indeed at that campground, then my search was over.

The power of the geomagnetic storm was too great ... North Anna had exploded.

## 34 – ROAD WARRIOR

My will was gone. Everything I had in me poured from my soul and onto the hard surface of that road. All my fight dissipated and anything I had left to battle the physical demons of my body ... left. I was depleted. My injuries and illness invaded and conquered. I was done.

West had to drag me to the car, I fought him, but that took the last of my strength.

He buckled me in and we hauled ass.

"You don't know, Audrey," he said. "You don't know."

At least that was what I thought he said. I had lost all ability to hear correctly, nothing sounded right.

"They could have gotten out. We go around and head back when you're better. I promise." He grabbed my hand. "Hold on."

I wasn't aware of much, but I knew he drove fast. He wanted to get us out of that ten mile radius. My head bounced from left to right with each swerve he made, I faded in and out.

"We're through Louisa, we're out of the ten miles," he announced.

I tried to look at him, a gloss had taken over my vision, he seemed to be clouded, underwater.

"Not far to Adam. Not far at all. Hang on."

Then the car slowed down. I heard a sputtering and then nothing.

"Shit!" he banged the steering wheel over and over. "The gauge was wrong. Son of a bitch."

"Leave me."

"Right." He opened his car door and a few seconds later, he opened mine.

"I can't."

"Yes, yes, you can. We need to move. The doc isn't that far. Come on. If you don't move, I stay here."

I nodded my head in defeat and accepted his help out of the car.

I may have failed in finding my family, but I wasn't going to fail West. I believed him when he said he'd stay behind. He wasn't going to leave me.

Once out of the car, he shouldered a bag he grabbed from the car, then supported me by the waist and we began our walking journey.

I gave it my all, struggling with every step.

He kept talking.

"You'll get that hand taken care of. I need to get this nose fixed. It's broke, like crushed."

"I'm sorry. How far ... Adam?" I asked.

“Maybe five or six miles.”

I may not have been able to talk, but I could do math, at our pace it would be hours of walking. “We’re ... we’re out of the danger zone, right?”

“I don’t know. I think so. When Chernobyl happened, there was a town called Pripyat. It was twenty some miles away. They weren’t evacuated and they got sick. It depends on the wind.”

“I’m sorry. I wish we knew.”

“Wait. We do.” He stopped walking. After warning me he was letting go, he removed his arm from my waist and grabbed the knapsack. He reached inside, pulled out a small flashlight, then reached in again. “Here.”

“What ... what is it?”

“The colonel gave me a dosimeter card.” He showed me the credit card size object. I couldn’t make it out too well, it was blurry. “It’ll tell us if we’re exposed.” He lit the flashlight on it.

“Well?”

He put the card and flashlight away, slung the pack over his shoulder and held on to me again. “Yeah, we are.”

“Fuck. Shoot me now,” I said. “Broken ribs, pneumonia, a dead hand and now radiation sickness.”

West laughed, it was good to hear that, almost like a medicine, a medicine that didn’t last long.

My legs gave way and with every step I nearly toppled to the ground.

“Okay, alright, let’s give you a break.”

“Thank you.”

When he said that, I thought we’d sit down, I didn’t expect him to lift me. He did. He took me into his arms, adjusted my weight the best he could, and West carried me.

My head rested against his shoulder, I knew he struggled. I could feel it in the way he walked. Staggering footsteps, occasional buckling of his knees.

“Put me down,” I said. “We can stop.”

“We can’t stop.”

“A few minutes, we’ll be fine.”

“A few minutes can be deadly.”

“West.”

He stopped walking.

I thought it was to take that rest, but then I saw headlights. The car neared us and stopped.

“West?”

“Oh my God.”

I heard the car door open. I lifted my head but couldn’t see. “What

is it?"

"Shane."

< > < > < > < >

The car wasn't big, it reminded me a lot of my own when they placed me in the back. Very little room and hard seats. It didn't matter though, they laid me across the back seat. Hearing that it was Shane made my mind race with questions. What was he doing there? Why ... was he there?

I know West had the same questions, and I tried to listen. However, there was a noise in the car the moment they shut the door, a constant noise, steady, high pitched, almost a short airy squeak that combined with my ringing ears, and the special effects tone to their voices made deciphering exactly what they said difficult. But I got the gist of it.

"Attacked," West said.

"Oh my God."

"I'm fine."

"You don't look it."

"I am. She's not."

*Squeak. Squeal.* What is that sound?

"There's a doctor at the Walmart," West said.

"Adam, yeah. He needs help evacuating," he replied. "That's how I knew where you ..."

*Squeal, Squeal.* The noise drowned out what he said.

"Does he have cars there?" West asked. "Get her to Lynchburg and I'll ..."

The noise again. What was it?

"That could work," Shane said. "Maybe he can give Audrey something to help her until Lynchburg."

"We'll stop." Through my clouded vision, I saw West look back at me. "We have to."

*Squeak, Squeal, Squeak.* The noise grow even louder. Didn't they hear it?

"How?" West asked. "I'm mean what are you ...?"

Their words faded even more, the noise in the car increased in volume and in my anxiety, my heartbeat joined the chorus of ringing in my ears., Their conversation become bits of words.

"Waynes ..."

"Are ... serious."



“Note.”

“Shit.”

Suddenly, as the last of their voices faded, I figured out what the noise was. It wasn't the brakes, it wasn't the engine, it wasn't the car at all, it was me. I made the noise, it came from my body, my struggling lungs. It was the sound of my struggles, my gasping for every breath that I took.

I was dying.

## 35 – DREAMS OF SPLENDOR

It was bits and pieces. That was all I had. Bits and pieces of things that happened in the short ride.

“Shane is going to take you,” West said. “I’ll be there as soon as I help Adam.”

Vividly, I remembered my encounter with Adam. I woke to find him leaning into me, a look of confidence and compassion on his face.

“You got this, Audrey,” he said. “I aspirated that left lung. Now, that will make you feel comfortable. Rest.”

There it was, my confirmation. Or so I thought.

He was making me feel comfortable because he didn’t want my last moments of life in pain.

The noise had stopped and the struggle to breathe had lessened, I was going to float away.

I did, but not in death like I imagined. My body felt as if it sunk into a thick soft pillow and I fell fast asleep. A deep slumber that carried emotions and thoughts from my conscious mind.

Wishful thinking projected itself in my dream.

If I had strived for anything in my life it was to raise my children to be good people. Individuals who were kind and caring. They didn’t need to be doctors or lawyers, they could work anywhere, do anything, as long as they were happy and good people.

Of that I had failed with Michael.

There was still hope for Molly, if I lived to see it.

I got a traffic ticket not one year earlier, my first and only traffic ticket in my life. I was sipping my drink through a straw and was pulled over for distracted driving. The judge reamed me so badly, one would have thought I committed murder. That judge, Judge Manning made into my dream. It was the oddest, lucid dream. He sat on the bench, gavel in hand, glaring at me.

*A jury of my peers and included Ken, Michael, that Tall Man who tried to kill me and some random woman I didn’t know.*

*“You brought this on yourself,” Manning scolded. “Look at you. Sick, dying, pathetic. You complained your family left, yet you did the same thing. Your condition worsened, you were beaten. What the hell is wrong with you?”*

*“Mom,” Michael said. “Why didn’t you stay home?”*

*Ken shook his head.*

*“Back up,” shouted Tall Man. “Back up.”*

*What the hell? Why was he saying anything?*

*“You’re trying to kill me,” I said.*

*"Not at all." Tall Man said. "Back up."*

*"Audrey, Audrey," the woman spoke from the jury box. "Lose the hand, save your life."*

*"Take it."*

*"No. She's weak," yelled Tall Man. "Back up."*

*"She's strong," said Michael. "Mom, you're strong. Do it."*

*"Why do you care?" I asked Michael. "You hate me."*

*"I don't hate you, I love you."*

*"Back up."*

*"We have to do it now."*

*"Do it."*

*"Back up."*

*"I'm sorry, Mom."*

*"Mom."*

Again, it happened, the exterior sound of Michael's voice waking me. I opened my eyes. I was on my back staring up, everything was blurry

"Someone put her under," a woman's voice called. "We have to move."

A man in scrubs extended a mask over my face, covering my nose and mouth. I felt the cool air hit against my nostrils and when the man stepped back, I saw him.

It had to be part of my predeath delusion. He stood there, staring at me as they rolled me away. It had to be a hallucination, because there was no way, no how, Michael was there.

## 36 – TED JENKINS CAR

For the first time since the event I was able to feel my fingers. I could wiggle them, bend them, one of them even itched and that was after they amputated my entire right hand at the wrist. I was expecting that, it still didn't lessen the shock.

I was placed into a coma, heavily sedated after surgery. Of course I don't remember any of it. My lung collapsed, I had pneumonia, three cracked ribs, a bruised larynx and a dash of radiation sickness. Until they could confirm that no surges were on the way, at least for a few days, I had to be ventilated by hand. A tedious task which meant someone had to squeeze the bulb to simulate my breathing.

With the coma and all the sleeping, I was going to be the most well rested person in the apocalypse.

Though still weak, I woke with a clearer head and less pain. I was alone when I opened my eyes. I was in a white cloth tent lit by a kerosene lantern. It was late at night, I felt that. I kept thinking, "My God, if that falls over, I'm toast."

Shane was the first person I saw, he stepped into the tent shortly after I woke. Then I saw him. My vision wasn't blurry, he was crystal clear. He held a cup of coffee and froze as if seeing me awake was unexpected.

He looked good. His hair was clean and combed, his clothing neat.

"You're up," he smiled.

"Yeah." I tried to moisten my lips. "I'm really thirsty."

"I'll get you something. Stay right here, I mean ... wait." He ran out almost nervously.

I closed my eyes, hearing an exchange of words, I recognized the voice to be West, he sounded tired and hoarse.

"You sure?" West asked.

"Yeah."

"Go on. I'll take the water."

I wanted badly to sit up, or at least adjust myself to move a little, but it was impossible with the missing appendage. I would have to learn things all over again. Using only my left hand, pushed me sideways.

"Not going to be so easy for a little while," West said, walking in. "It's good to see you up."

"It's good to see *you*. Really good. Thank you for everything."

"Nah." He brought the water over.

"I need to sit up some."

"Here." He placed the water on the table, then reached for the

back of the cot. "Let me give you a hand."

Pause.

I just looked at him.

"I didn't ... I didn't mean it that way," West said.

"It's okay. I'm alive, right? So it's funny."

Once he had me up, he sat down and brought the straw of the cup to my mouth and instructed me to drink slowly.

I did and I noticed how different he looked. His color was off, he was slightly pale and his busted nose wasn't healing correctly. He wore a baseball cap to cover up the fact that his brown and gray locks were gone.

"West. Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, just a little radiation sickness. No worries, you still have your hair. I was moving too many people. I'm getting better."

"How long have I been out?"

"A week. They expected you to get up tomorrow. Long enough to get some color, you sound and look good. Where the hell is that damn doctor?" he looked over his shoulder, then sighed.

"So ... while you were out, you didn't happen to find my family?"

"No," he replied, then paused. "But Shane did."

"Wait. What?" As soon as I questioned what he said, the tent flap opened and Michael limped in holding a very sleepy looking Molly perched on his hip. "Oh my God." My words shook and I whimpered. I was blasted by the sight of them, I didn't believe I was awake, I thought it was all part of those crazy dreams I had. My son looked different. It didn't make sense with all that happened, he looked healthy. Something I hadn't seen on him in a long time. "Michael. You're alive."

West looked at me curiously. "I thought you knew. Shane said you knew."

"Mom, you saw me when you came in."

I shook my head. "I thought it was a hallucination. Oh my God." I reached for him and my daughter, realizing I didn't have a hand to grab them with.

"We'll come on your other side." Michael walked over, he lowered Molly down for me to kiss.

"Mama sick?" Molly asked.

"Mama's sick, baby."

Molly snuggled against Michael's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I am so sorry. I ..." Michael broke down, his word fast becoming sobs.

"Mike," West spoke soft and firm. "What did I tell you? Okay?"

Michael looked at West and nodded.

I had no idea what he meant, but my son leaned down and kissed

me on the forehead. He whispered, "Thanks for not quitting on me."

"I will never, ever quit on you," I said. "Never. How ... how did you get here?"

"Hey," Shane blurted out happily as he stepped back in. "Sorry. I'm interrupting."

"No." I shook my head. "West said you found my family."

"Well, it was luck actually." Shane scratched his head. "The colonel, you know what she's like, she went with me to Waynesboro and insisted I follow her down here. I left the note like you asked by the way. And when we got here ..." He pointed at Michael. "He came hobbling over, looking."

"I always made my way over when new people came," Michael said. "Shane recognized me."

"Actually, it was Molly," Shane winked. "You look a bit different than the picture. You were like seventeen in it. So ... it was luck. I told him about you, told him to stay put and I chased after you guys. I didn't want you heading to Fredericksburg. The Walmart doctor told me which route you took."

"How did you end up here?" I asked.

Michael stepped back and pointed down to the cast on his leg. "My bike ran out of gas before everything stopped. I was just about in town walking the highway when cars started crashing and planes fell. I can't tell you how many times I was almost hit. It was like a video game. But I made it, I was in the clear, and then I get to your street and Ted Jenkins hits me with his car when he was killed by a surge."

"Roy never mentioned that."

Shane cleared his throat. "Um, remember you didn't ask. Roy rambled and then he .... well died."

"He knew though," Michael said. "Ken took me and Molly, we got in an old car, left before everyone else to try to get help. We followed a rumor and it brought us here. I thought ... I thought Ken was going to kill me, Mom. I thought when he found out I left ... but he didn't. He said he knew you were at least safe."

In all my excitement over my children, I felt guilty for not asking. Perhaps a part of me was afraid to hear the truth, but I had to ask. "Michael, where's Ken now?"

Michael shook his head. "I don't know. He left about ten days ago to look for you. We haven't heard from him. He said to wait here or go home."

"He'll be back. I'm sure of it," I said. "He'll be back."

Suddenly, right there in that moment, all of my injuries and sicknesses seemed minuscule in the scope of things. I witnessed what I believed was a miracle.

I had missed my son long before the event, I wanted him back and

as I looked at him, holding his sister, he was returning to me.

I wanted to find my family, and even though it was an obscure way, I had. Without West and Shane, none of it would have been possible. I owed them my life, and I would be forever grateful, they ... were part of us now, a part of my family.

It wouldn't be long, I believed, before Ken joined us. We would all forge forward. The world would be a different place, but one we would all conquer. We would do it together.

## 37 – NOT ABOUT YOU

### Three Years Later

While West checked the bridle on the horse, I examined the crates he placed in the cart. Something was wrong.

“Did Shane make a mistake?” I asked. “Get my instructions wrong?”

“Nope.” West replied. “Do you have the water? Food? It’s gonna be cold tonight. Grab us an extra blanket. And my scarf. My nose hurts like a bitch when it’s cold.”

“Not my problem,” I said.

“You don’t think?” He looked at me over the top of his glasses.

“Hmm,” I grumbled. “Okay, so Shane got my instructions. Did Michael miscount then?”

“Nope.”

“But there’s less back there than last month.”

“Yep.”

“Oh, stop with the one word answers.”

“Audrey, I told Michael less.”

“Why?” I asked. “Demand has increased.”

“And if we keep meeting that then our price goes down. Nope, let’s make it a valued commodity. Winter’s coming. We need to stock up. Go kiss Molly, do your ten minute goodbye routine and let’s hit the road. Go.”

“Fine.” I stormed off hearing him shout about the scarf.

It was typical of us, always bantering before we went somewhere. West and I had become best friends, and in a way partners in the new world.

Things were different.

The world itself became a different place. The reliance on electronics trickled away until we didn’t need them anymore. We missed them but didn’t need them. The sun still burped here and there and it wasn’t worth taking a chance. The Colonel said it was a new cycle of the sun. It used to be X-class flares were frightening over the minor disturbances they would cause, now we longed for those days.

Without means of long range communication, we had no clue what was happening with the rest of the world. Gone were the days of waking up to news of global conflict, or fear of terrorism and war. I suppose one day it will all come back, when future generations try to make life easier again.

As for us, we kept it simple.



For as big as it was, the habitable landmass was smaller, much smaller. It worked because so was the population.

There was government structure but on a smaller scale. Almost as if each state was its own country. Our area had a mayor and statesmen that kept things in order. Organized food runs and outposts until everyone started being self-sufficient. They kept us fed, but it was an unspoken, unwritten law that each person had to contribute to the outpost.

We did.

Then everyone settled into routine, self-made communities that either farmed or manufactured. If you needed anything you bartered with a nearby community or waited until the monthly trade day. In the state of Virginia that was the first Saturday of the month in Lynchburg. Rain, shine or snow. I preferred shine, because it was a miserable ride by horse and buggy in the rain.

On my journey to find my family, I fell in love with Pippin Vineyard and the beauty of it. Unfortunately, it wasn't cleared as safe from radiation, so when no one claimed Afton Mountain Vineyards we did. The land had several guesthouses and cottages, enough for all of us to live on the same land and work it.

Theoretically it was a good plan, everyone wanted wine.

I didn't have a clue about farming, grapes or winemaking, but I did learn the Dewey Decimal System enough to go to the library and get educated.

West asked me if I thought it was a good idea with Michael's history. Michael was doing good. He met a young woman named Lana, they claimed marriage and lived together in our community. They want badly to have children. One day they would. He slipped up a lot, but he was far better than he was before the event. In hindsight the vineyard wasn't healthy for my son. But it wasn't just about him. It was for the greater good. The vineyard was healthy for the community I built on that land. We had a good trade and it yielded quite a bit for us.

Shane was a vital part as well, a decision maker and he truly kept us running. It was weird but I always held high hopes he'd end up in some sort of romantic entanglement with Jane, despite the age difference. Jane wasn't interested. She focused on watching the sun and had taken Troy under her wing, not only as a protégé but like a son.

Within three years of being there, we went from me, my children, Shane, West, Troy and the Colonel to thirty-three people and counting.

Despite the growing Afton community, one person never showed up ... Ken.

I didn't give up on him. Not once and I probably never would.

One a month, weather permitting, I traveled north to Waynesboro to check the note on the door and to look for Ken. My house and neighborhood were overgrown, it seemed faded and washed out by the sun and heat.

Every trip to the monthly trade I looked for him. Every holiday I set a place for him at the table. I wouldn't let myself believe he was dead. When asked where I thought he was, I simply stated, he moved on. Maybe found love. Anything but gone.

West was always edgy when we left for trade, as he was this day. He blamed it on the cold, I blamed it on the travel distance. If West had his way, we'd stop going to the monthlies and set up our own post center of the communities, like a store with Troy working it.

I preferred the monthly trades, not only to look for Ken, but it was the new way of networking. West claimed I was the boss and it was my choice. It wasn't.

I would like to take credit as the leader, but it wasn't just me, no matter what people thought or said. I didn't do it alone. No one does.

When I was first reunited with my children, Michael was upset and West gave him a warning, something about 'remember what I told you'.

One day I asked West what that meant. He simply said he told Michael, "When your mom wakes up be supportive. Don't make this about you, it's not all about you."

How quickly he had taught my son in those days.

The hard-core reality was, those words, 'It's not all about you' applied to everyone. It could never again be about 'one' person, not if we were going to survive and thrive as a community. Every choice, every decision was made with the greater good of all involved.

The event took so much from us, family, friends and lifestyles, but it also gave the world something else ... a fresh start. A fresh start to do things right, perhaps better.

Eventually, future mankind would probably mess that up, but in the meantime, we all would do the best we could to just move forward and make it work.

The world was much different. It was about the ability to adapt and change. Trial and error, learn along the way. It wasn't always easy and it wasn't always perfect, but we did the best we could.

Thank you so much for diving into this book. I hope you enjoyed it.

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